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CALLIOPE

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The Faculty Advisor selects the Lillian Spencer Award winners for Best Poem and Best Prose piece. John Welsh of the Languages, Literature and Dramatic Arts Department selected this year's Best Artwork winner.

Cover Art: **Stravinski**
Monoprint
Shawna Silverman

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* **Wall's Crest, Observing Moat**
Charles Parker, Jr. ..... *Opening Photograph*

Wall's Crest, Observing Moat
Charles Parker, Jr.

The High Life

Step by step he proceeds with
arms extended out, hands
tightly gripping the metal bar to
steady his balance. He
places one foot out in front
of him, sliding it slowly
along the taut wire stretched
to stiffness beneath
his feet, his face a contorted
mask: jaw clenched, brow
furrowed, his trained eye fixed
on the tightrope he haltingly
traverses; every muscle
constricted with the effort
of his exertion, he is
oblivious to the eerie
silence which has fallen
over the once animated
arena, as he inches
his way across the span stretched
out before him, faltering
only once, as the crowd, perched
expectantly on their seats, expel
their breath.

Tammy Shealey Owens

Ode to Progression

My new opthalmologist
prescribed progressive lenses
for such diverse distance work
of mine as painting, teaching,
research writing and computer.
"What are they and why do they
do what they do?" I asked.
"Perfection--your natural sight."

I took my astigmatism
and prescription to optical
shop where I was measured
from center to center of both irises.
The new glasses have no tell-tale
elliptical bifocal lenses,
instead progress in distance as
I carefully cast my eyes down.

This is progress I pronounce,
adjusting my invisible pair
of berry rimmed glasses
to see what I could see.
A colored rainbow around
Daffin Park's spraying fountain,
has it always been there?

I see translucent beads of water
suspended on the outside curve
of terra cotta potted plant
atop the patio table
through my kitchen window.

It doesn't stop. This morning
the phone rings and I debate
whether to answer, just as a
thrasher wrestles with a wriggling worm.
I answer the phone and assume
he won, with body pulled so taut.

Rachel McReynolds Brown

Cups
Renee Hill

Appreciation

Catherine Hope Greene

She lay in the tub half-asleep. The water, to her chin, was cold. Unable to really feel it, she knew it must be because she'd been in it for hours. Just how long, she wasn't sure of either, but her fingertips were pruned, pink, raw.

She thought about the last three nights. They had been much like this.

She leaned forward to pull the drain cord, intending to refresh the water. The water glugged and swirled. Rapidly counter-clockwise.

The night before, it had taken three hours for the tub to drain. She'd watched the last drop swirl downward, wishing she could wash away everything as easily.

Tonight she felt robbed of something as the drain sated itself after five minutes. She turned the left spigot. Water streamed out. She turned it more and hot water gushed. She saw it bounce off the white porcelain and hit her legs.

She thought of a gunshot wound to the head, and in her mind, blood spurted upward and outward. The hot water continued to pour from the faucet evenly downward and she shook her head, seeing the tile of the wall to her left and then the white wood of the bathroom door. She caught glimpses of the mirrored medicine cabinet as she shook her head repeatedly, trying to lose the image of the bleeding head.

She realized she wasn't feeling the stinging slap of wet hair even as she shook her head harder.

This morning, her mother had left a note on her bedroom door. "Please clean your hair out of the drain next time you shower. Thanks, love, Mom." Well, that problem was cleared up. She knew her mother wouldn't have gotten the pun.

She fell asleep for a few minutes. It was Friday night but she had no intention of going out. She slept on, in the tub, the water turning warm, then cold. She dreamed of drowning. Sometime later, her seven year old brother woke her. He gave her the towel in which she found herself wrapped the next morning.

She wished he hadn't seen her naked. There was a time when she hadn't minded being seen naked. She had a great

appreciation for her body. As had Jonathan. Not just in a sexual way, but in the way one enjoys good food or moves to music one loves. She remembered standing up next to his bed, walking across his room, pretending to look for something just to know he was watching her, wanting her, most of all, appreciating her. He would always say *thank you*, not knowing how selfish her nakedness was. And she would smile to herself, *you're welcome*.

She heard her mother calling her to breakfast, heard her knock on the bedroom door, calling, "Are you hungry, dear?" and then turning to go when she got no answer. She must have assumed her daughter was asleep, briefly wondered if she had eaten recently, but avoided any discussion if not.

She was alone again and she jerked upward, sitting on the side of the high bed.

She wanted to jump up, run out to the hallway, tell her about the other night, scream, He hurt me, Momma, he hurt me, he hit me and threw me down, and crushed me and I bled, oh my God, I bled! But she didn't get up, didn't run anywhere. Her mother would only start crying and insist she see somebody.

Her head began to ache as she remembered. She felt the darkness just as it had been that night. She remembered thinking of Jonathan, wishing things were different. A twinge of anger had overcome her as she turned into the dark street that was her shortcut home. She'd lost him, all right, but was it really her fault? He'd said she was unfeeling and unresponsive. He'd said this because she said *me too* when he told her he cared very deeply about her. She wasn't unfeeling, just embarrassed. He should have known she loved him too. She just wasn't good at expressing her feelings. She'd thought the guitar she'd bought him for Christmas was a pretty good expression of her love. And the sex. He'd said it was the best he'd ever had and you could only make love like that if you truly felt it. She'd agreed and they'd had sex again. What else did he want? She spent most of her time with him. Maybe her self-expression was a bit off.

All around her, shadows had lengthened as the sun fell. She quickened her pace, looked around at the dark. She smelled stale beer and felt broken glass under her shoes. She started to run home but was pulled around half-circle by a mad, leering hand. She tried to scream, but her throat closed. Lashing out, she struck flesh and heard a man grunt, "Stupid whore." Whoever this man was became irrelevant and she thought, crazily, of her father and how he used to

chide her for coming home too late, for walking home alone. The man slammed his fist into her face, and she cried, through blood, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

She had come to on the sidewalk, temples throbbing, naked waist-down. Thank God, I'm alone, she thought and slowly she got up, searching in the dark for her skirt. She found it and pulled it around her. Holding it there, she slowly walked home, a light wind chafing her raw lips.

It was late when she walked in the back door. Thankful her family was asleep, she went to the bathroom and after filling the tub, lay down in it. Unable to cry, unable to sleep, she got out and went to her room. Her long brown hair in one hand, she reached for her scissors with the other. Jonathan had loved her hair, often brushing it or braiding it for her. But Jonathan was gone now.

Then her hair was all around her on the floor. Looking into the mirror, she wondered if her eyes held that wounded, hurt look always written about in romance novels, and if they did, did it matter because the love of her life was never going to save her what with her head looking so big now that she was practically bald. She took the mirror from the wall and lay it glass down on the floor.

Three days later, she was in bed, listening to the clink of dishes and silverware as her family ate breakfast. She got dressed and went downstairs. They stared at her head. No one said anything. They probably passed it off as rebellion.

She walked out the back door. It was a bright Saturday, perfect for hanging out in the park, smoking pot with her friends. She thought briefly of calling a couple of them, but decided to take a walk. She walked until she suddenly stopped, realizing she was on Jonathan's porch. Her hands flew to her head, she felt her shorn hair, and she turned to go.

"What are you doing here?" He was angry, his voice guttural.

She remained facing away. She began to shake. All her hope of remaining numb left her. "Why are you still angry at me?" she screamed, surprising herself with the volume. "I did nothing to you." She turned to him and he was right there. She could smell the chocolate on his breath.

"Exactly. You did nothing. When I told you I couldn't stay, you said nothing. When I left, you didn't even watch me go."

She didn't reply. What could she say? I'm sorry, Jonathan. I got raped and now I need you back. No, she couldn't say that.

"What happened to you?" He reached for her head. She felt his hand slide until it came to rest on her shoulder. He touched her cheek. She started to cry, shaking more violently now. He leaned toward her, knowing from months of experience that she wouldn't lean into him.

"No," he said, "I didn't do this to you. You're not upset about me, are you? You'd never let me hurt you like this." He sounded upset by this thought, and she wondered if he wished he had hurt her, to prove something.

"I wish it had been you, Jonathan. Then I might've understood. The pain might have made sense." He didn't answer. "I love you, Jonathan. I thought you knew."

"Then why couldn't you say that to me, Katie?" He paused. "But I've thought about it in the last two weeks, and I realize that you express yourself differently. That those flowers and cheesy poems, and even those moans," he grinned here, "mean the same thing to you. Should mean the same thing to me."

"I don't want to go. But I don't want to talk anymore. Do you think you're the only one who can be hurt?" She stopped there, looking up to stare at his window. The curtain was open. She knew he'd been reading. He could only read by the window in the daylight.

"I was reading," he said, and she smiled. They looked at each other for a while. "Will you come inside?"

Thinking of the other night, knowing sex could never be the same again, she started to say no, but he reached for her hand. "If you want to tell me what happened to you, I'll listen. But you don't have to. Just let me hold you, run my hands over your head. It feels like velvet."

They watched TV all afternoon. At eight, he fixed her dinner. He asked his roommates to go out, and they enjoyed the silence so rarely heard in the house.

In the morning, she reached for her clothes lying next to the bed. They hadn't made love, but for once, she was happy about that. She leaned over, kissed his eyes, and he murmured, "Katie." She read by the window until he awoke.

Window
David Stanford

Dreaming Under the Light

A friend and I were mugged under the faint glow of a street light.
I didn't feel the bullet, just a fading away.
I opened my eyes to find I hadn't yet awakened from my dream.
The bathtub was full of blood-stained water.
I saw his scarred face as he wiped the vapor covered mirror.
The old man's eyes raised the hair on the back of my neck.
His high pitched incessant giggling echoed through the cemetery.
I ran and ran but found myself in the same place.
The bulbs emitted a blue hue over the hall of the basement.
The chilled stone of the cave wall cooled my seared skin.
Opening the trapdoor revealed a lush tropical world.
The lion leisurely stalked me from sunlight to moonlight.
The night was enfolded in a thick shroud of fog.
Out of the darkness came the sound of wings flapping furiously.
The waves looked like rolling silver under the light of the round moon.

Tammy Shealey Owens

The Agony
Cindy Intorre

The Scrap
Nicole Weber

Stereotyped

Oh, Oh,
Another one.
Another one
with kids behind her.
Another one who's pregnant
again.
Another one who's probably scared, but not
worried.
She has the government on
her side.
Girl, young naive girl, didn't your
mother
ever talk to you about
BIRTH CONTROL
Or, let me guess,
She had you when she was
Fifteen too.
Understand your situation? Accidents happen?
I don't Understand, and
Accidents can be prevented.
You're gonna be another statistic.
I'll pay your baby's way, and I'm not even related to you.
But you'll be thinkin' it'll be a
free ride.
You're wrong,
Black girl.

Marti Baker

Another Night in America

Roseanne is on TV---Laughing
Dryly, I swallow stale Budweiser
With fat free pretzels

At the kitchen table. A battery
Worn out remote in my hand, I click
All 37 channels, nothing

But junk--Mrs. Clinton's chalky
White face stares at me from
The cover of TIME. A scornful look

In her icy blue eyes! My bones
Shiver like the windchimes of
Mr. Juvo nextdoor. He is a magician

Not old, not rich, not knowing
English as much as I do. A cloudy-fur cat
He has, but she does not understand

His Turkish- - ". . . must speak in
English. . ." I said once, but he
Won't. I never asked why because

It would hurt him. CLICK! OJ Simpson's
Dark face, dark smiles but dazzling
White teeth on the screen--"I am

Not" CLICK! My bones shiver again under
The Made in China silk nightgown. Red
Sirens are heard breathlessly far down

The street. I sip the warm salty
Budweiser nervously which tastes
Like Mr. Juvo's tears on my lips.

Kyonghee Ingraham

John and Yoko as Shawna and George
Shawna Silverman

Gibraltar

Freya Roseane Poller

I like to walk on the beach this time of the morning. It is always gray and cool until the sun emerges from the horizon. The sunrises here are not spectacular in any way, but they give me a comforting feeling of being all alone for once.

I have a favorite rock that I like to think of as all mine. Its mica flecked surface is cool and comforting; it is something I can grasp when it seems that I'm at risk of floating into the stratosphere. I have spent countless hours perched on my rock; reading, thinking and dreaming. The rock was all mine, the safest of havens, until I brought Andrew there, but now I'm not sure if I have any claim to it anymore.

Andrew is like that; he is the princely type who possesses all land within his sight, and every thing on it. He has never been any other way; he knows nothing beyond flashing a dazzling charismatic smile to force people to bend to his will, to his way.

I didn't see it like that at first; I saw him as one of those beautiful beings who exist on another plane, someone touched by luck. He lifted me out of my rather comfortable, somewhat complacent way of life into a world where people laugh and drink martinis and discuss politics and art. Before Andrew and the changes he affected, I felt mousy and ineffectual in "those type" of social situations. I did not particularly care for such things. But Andrew extended a strong hand and since that moment I have done that miraculous transformation known as "coming into one's self." I have become adept at small talk, and have learned the ins and outs of being the perfect ornament.

And I am marrying him.

We decided to get married because Andrew believes very firmly in a well-grounded family. He jokes about getting me barefoot and pregnant and keeping me that way. When we are at the dinner table, in the car, at the grocery store, most anywhere, he whispers, "Let's make love in the kitchen tonight!" or the garage or on the beach or whatever place tickles his libidinous fancy. He sometimes even substitutes the phrase "make love" with "make a baby." I look forward to having children too, but I want to do some things for myself first. I have never seen the Mediterranean sea, and

thousands of other things are still undone. We certainly will have ample money to travel, if I can talk him into it. I could always whisper sexy things in his ear about sex in exotic places. Still, I know that he is set on having kids, and I think I can stall for time, and stay on birth control. I just hope it doesn't provoke a maelstrom of disapproval from his doting and slightly eccentric aunts.

Last week at the wedding shower, his Aunt Eunice bragged to me about what a large penis he had as a baby and how our wedding night would be thrilling.

"You know, Claudia, there are certain things a woman must be prepared for on her wedding night," she coached, placing a jewel encrusted hand on my knee.

"We must always try to give our husbands the sexual attentions they need," she lowered her eyes and voice confidentially, "even if we are a little scared."

Her tendony hands felt for her diamonds, at her throat. Still there.

She continued, "And even though we may not enjoy sex very much at first, we'll learn to appreciate it in time."

I love that collective "we." I can't help thinking of Aunt Eunice standing beside our bed telling me where to put my legs and which body parts to kiss. The whole time she was talking, I debated whether or not to tell her just how thrilling I have always found sex. I held back, though, because anyone with a name as storybook perfect as Aunt Eunice couldn't handle it.

My wedding dress is a lavish, snow white affair with an obscene amount of lace overlay and a very chaste neckline. Andrew's aunts believe firmly in my virginity, and I hesitate to dissuade them. I will wear my dress of purity with a very small smile because I know the truth.

I always promised my mother that I would never get married before twenty-six. She says, "Claudia, please do not make the same mistakes I did!" She twists her turquoise wedding band absently. "After three marriages, I feel that I am qualified to give you motherly advice." She grins, and one eyebrow punctuates her half-silliness; half-seriousness. "Have fun," she says, and lights a cigarette. "Travel," she says, and inhales. "Live with the man of your choice for a while," she says, still holding her breath,"but don't jump into it," and she exhales. "It is much easier to leave your live-in than get a divorce. I only want the best for you." I have learned

this speech by heart; she's been telling me since I was eight or so.

So I guess that I'm a few years ahead of schedule. I couldn't let a person as together as Andrew get away, though. He is the quintessential "good catch". He is handsome, well off, and good natured in that classic way that the logo on a polo shirt is meant to imply . Is it unhealthy to marry someone because you are afraid that you will never do better? That if you don't act now he'll be gone because it is a limited-time-only-offer?

I think that I have just got a case of pre-wedding jitters. Andrew's aunts tell me endless anecdotes about how they had fears and misgivings, but that their marriages turned out to be very fulfilling. Aunt Eunice loves to tell me about how mismatched she and Uncle Arnold were. "Why, it seems like only yesterday that Arnold and I were newlyweds," she tells me in the voice that is almost exclusively used for telling secrets or relaying gossip. Or gospel. " We had the biggest argument on our honeymoon because he wanted to play poker with some of the men on the cruise ship." Her mouth stretches in an ambiguous smile, amazement/amusement, like she still can't believe it happened. "I barely saw him for seven days, and I just played shuffleboard and cried my eyes out." She stares at the pattern on the carpet, frowns, then smiles brightly. "By the end of the cruise, though, he had three new big clients and I got my full-length mink out of those deals. I know now that he only did it because he loves me."

I think about how much Uncle Arnold "loved" Aunt Eunice and how it seems that he really did not have her best interests in mind. And I wonder how it will be with Andrew and me. I really wanted to go to graduate school before I started a family but I guess my Bachelor's will have to do for now. It won't do me a lot of good, though, because Andrew tells me what a marvelous life I'll have, being married to so much Old Savannah Money. He does an imitation of "society people" to make me laugh, very nasal and with a million "dahlings." He does really believe in society, though, and tells me in the snobby put on imitation that "You'll have such a mahvelous time at the ladies' auxiliary; you'll learn to play bridge and mahjongg and between that and the kids won't have a spare minute left to pursue work, or even read much." He jokes about it but I know this life is a very serious part of who he is, regardless of the fun he pokes. He feels as comfortable playing golf as he does drinking scotch with his dad's friends. And he does a lot of both.

I really want to be a good wife for him. I just wonder if I'll have time left over after being a wife for being me. He has never really understood about my books; when he finds me reading he finds something else for us to do. I think that he is not used to not receiving someone's undivided attention at all times.

"Aw, come on, Sugar, what's in that book that's better than making love? Ha! there's nothing that's better than making love, is there. Give me the book, that's the girl, now where is that perfect breast? Mmph, I found it!" he says, and there goes another pleasant afternoon in another world.

It is not that I detest sex; I find it mostly pleasant, sometimes ecstatic. I just resent the fact that he uses it as a tool to pry me from my books. It makes me wonder if he loves the actual sex, or just the monopoly on my time.

When sex is best between us, it is fantastic. Andrew is skilled; he knows all the right parts to touch and really tries to please me. When sex is not my top priority, when he uses it to get my attention, I tend to concentrate less on the sex and more on the beige carpeting, the shmaltzy music he has chosen, or how the garage floor really is too cold to lie on for very long. I hate to mentally rearrange the furniture in the middle of sex, but sometimes it's all I can do to keep from exploding or committing some other uncharacteristically violent act.

I have been retreating to my rock more and more often in the past weeks, to read and to think. I get up early, before the shopping and fitting and the kibitzing with his family. I take my book and walk the mile and a half down the beach until I get to my rock. Then I escape; immerse myself completely for the small time in the day that's mine alone. I am reading an anthology on mermaids right now, and it seems fitting that I am so close to the sea. My rock is in the book, too, it seems. In most mermaid stories there is a smooth granite rock on which the mermaid suns herself and combs her greeny hair. I imagine that I am in the book; that a handsome, unselfish, uncontrolling merman comes to sweep me out to sea. I always imagine that he knows nothing of the stock market, has never heard of prime interest rates, and only wishes to feed me ocean delicacies after we have had long, exhausting, emotionally satisfying sex.

Sadly, the only man who appears is my Andrew, who bellows cheerfully, "Hey, sexy, the day's a wastin'! How's about

you and me gettin' cozy on that rock of yours!" and of course that's the last thing I want to do, so I clamber down and tell him how anxious I am to pick out that new flatware at Levy's. Or whatever excuse seems handy.

I curse myself every day for taking Andrew to my secret rock. I did it in a moment of weakness when I worried that I'd lose him to Olivia, the lovely blonde with such a charming lisp. She was interning in his father's office, and he would tell me such diverting stories about her antics when we were supposed to be having serious hand-holding-eyes-locked-across-the-table dates. I remember the conversation down to the very last word.

"She's just the brightest little girl, for being a blonde, and cute too!" Andrew gushed. It scared me, and badly, because I choked out, "I have something very important to tell you. Can we get out of here?"

We left Elizabeth's and drove to the islands. I took him to the far end of the beach, where the Savannah River merges with the Atlantic, to the place where my rock sits. I climbed to the top and motioned for him to join me.

I took a deep breath and blurted, "Andrew, you are very important to me. I don't know what I'd do without you. I just get so jealous sometimes. I know I'm only being silly, but I want you to know how seriously I take you. And how I'm afraid I'll lose you. That's why we're here. This is my favorite place and I wanted to share it with you. Because--" And then I told him that I loved him. It was the first time that I had said it, and it was a lie. Because though I was (and am) very attracted to his thick wavy hair, honest eyes, and statuesque form, these things do not constitute love. And those words sealed my fate.

From that moment on, he really has been in exemplary form. He showers me with gifts, proclaims his reciprocal love for me, and never lets me alone for a minute. He has about fifty pet names for me.

" Honey, sweetie, muffin, dumplin, sugar pie! I just want to eat you up!" is the way that he expresses his affection-- publicly-- for me.

He introduced me to his distant relatives, and bragged about how well I was learning how to conduct myself in "society". I overheard Andrew tell his uncle Arnold on the phone, "She has a way to go, but she will make the most stunning wife once we send

her to Aunt Eunice's hairdresser, James. He really is the best. He'll put some curlers in her hair and goo on her face and she'll be a different woman. And she really is very well rounded once you get past her affair with books. We are trying to get some hobbies going for her, so she won't always have her perky little nose hidden in a book." And though all of this sounds slightly negative, never once did Andrew show a bit of bad taste or un-gentlemanly behavior. He has the uncanny ability to turn vinegar to honey, and though I consider myself a fairly intelligent person, I never have the smarts to put my finger right on what he says that makes me feel so small until after the moment has passed.

It was a full year after I confessed my love to Andrew that he proposed to me. It was easy enough for me to accept after a whole year of repeating I love yous. I whispered "I love you." I told him in bed, in the shower, and over dirty dishes, "I love you." It was my mantra, my lie that became so convincingly real to Andrew and everyone else that I was even almost convinced. It made things seem so easy. It offered relief from the nagging voices in my head that insisted that I was plain and unspectacular. It allayed my private fears that I would grow to be an old spinster with nothing to write about. It seemed to be, at the time, a measure of security as comforting as my rock.

Andrew proposed one year after I convinced myself that I needed him at all costs. It seems, even now, to be a page out of any Harlequin romance, but devoid of that characteristic tawdriness. He really does things right.

He took me to the place most dear to me. He lifted me onto my rock and asked for my hand in marriage. He said, "Please, Claudia, I would be most honored if you would be my wife. Will you marry me?" And for once his manner of speaking was not callow or brusque or inappropriate. I felt my chest fill with panic--like the feeling of a narrowly missed car wreck-- and I knew I could not refuse this offer of a life with him. I could not refuse what seemed to be the first person ever willing to give me, freely, his undivided attention. And, I must admit, that I was a bit like a crow when I saw that shiny ring that I was now qualified to wear as my prize.

In exchange for three carats of sophisticated carbon, I gave my favorite rock. My rock is no longer the haven that it was, cool and tangible at six-thirty in the morning. It is a constant reminder of

the responsibility that comes with my impending marriage. I feel like Andromeda, chained to the rock, awaiting my marriage monster. When I try to escape, Aunt Eunice floods into my consciousness, giving advice and admonishment.

"Claudia, my dear, you really must think about the way you speak in front of the Hutchins'. You wouldn't want them to think that Andrew was marrying below his station, would you?" I imagine Aunt Eunice plucking nervously at a Kleenex. " It is imperative that we watch ourselves at society functions; it really is wisest for ladies to nod politely when the men are talking." Aunt Eunice's grey curls bob emphatically to prove her point. "We can always discuss in the ladies' room. And liberal politics really have no place at the Yacht Club. We got to our place in society through our husband's shrewd business sense and social skills." She admires and preens her mink coat. There are rodents on her collar. Their beady glass eyes stare knowingly. It is 75 degrees outside. "These men have no time or tolerance for new fangled, bleeding heart politics. Just let them carry the conversation, and please, dear, only speak up if you can agree."

I look around before yelling in my loudest voice, "Aunt Eunice, begone!" Of course the only witnesses to my exorcism are the gulls, the sea, and the sun. Aunt Eunice fades with the October wind. There is a sour,omnipresent feeling though, that I cannot possibly live up to their standards. James' makeover will only do so much.

Andrew also invades my privacy, physically rather than nagging on my conscience. He hates to see me all alone. He sniffs me out; he has a bloodhound's aptitude for detecting my private time. He "rescues" me from my "loneliness" with blustery, cheerful, hamhanded compliments, invitations, and gestures. He pops up with picnics, arrives with wine, and always joins me, uninvited, in a place that used to be all mine. I know that scores of women would beg for such an attentive man, but . . .

"My love," I'll say, "I would like so very much to finish this chapter." (He likes it when I "talk fancy") "Couldn't we please meet later for baguettes and coffee?"

He pouts, and refuses. "I just want you now."

And on and on until I give in and give up my book.

I dream of escapes. I consider becoming a cloistered nun. The idea appeals to me because in the books, nuns always have plenty of time for personal reflection and certainly don't have to pick

out dishware at the bridal registry. I do imagine a Sister Eunice Margaret, though, who says, "Now really, Sister Claudia, you must stop reading those novels! When you entered the convent you took vows of chastity and poverty and this book flouts both vows. Go to the Mother Superior!"

Then I imagine leaving him at the altar. "I'm sorry, my dear, I know that this must be a major social embarrassment, but I simply cannot marry you. You are too controlling, and do not treat me as an equal. I'm going to get my master's degree. In Women's Studies!"

But I realize that this would not be fair to him or his family that wants so desperately to see him married off. And fantasy will only carry me so far.

Aunt Eunice is helping me into my wedding dress. Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue. Aunt Eunice's diamond solitaire necklace is to be the something borrowed. She reaches around my neck, her hands brushing cool and leathery on my nape. Goose flesh peppers my body as she does the clasp.

"You know, Claudia," she says, and as she catches her breath I anticipate her insipid speech about living up to family standards.

"Claudia, I want you to think very hard about the contract you are entering. I have been married to Arnold for forty years, and not always happily. It has been good for me, but I'm not sure that a day has gone by that I have not wished for a chance at something better. You are right for this family, and we would love to have you. I'm just not sure that we are right for you. Please, Claudia, think carefully before you go through with this. As much as I'd love to see you marry Andrew, I'd hate to see you as miserable as I have been for the past thirty years. Marriage changed me, and maybe not for the better. Make sure that you want this."

A confession like this, at the eleventh hour, is the last thing I'd ever expect from Aunt Eunice. I fight to dislodge the lump in my throat as we finish dressing me; something old, something new, diamond necklace, something blue.

It's time. My dress is really perfect, a fairy tale of white lace and tulle and pearls. "Good luck, Honey," Aunt Eunice says as she squeezes the breath out of me. There isn't much there in the first place. My chest feels tight, and my blood is racing with so much

intoxicating adrenaline. I step into the aisle with growing confidence. This is all going to be O.K. I have just been too nervous about this whole thing. It's time to relax. Deep breaths, deep breaths, just relax, Claudia, relax! I'm making the right choice. And I'm here. Relax. To have and to hold, till death do us part, I do, I do.

And we're back at the house. Andrew said that he had a big surprise for me before we go to Bermuda. I'm trying to peek through the blindfold, but the pattern of the scarf obscures my vision. Fuschia flowers everywhere. A flourish, and the blindfold is gone. There it is. He's so excited, like a little boy, practically falling over himself. And there's my rock. In the backyard next to the inground pool that he built for swimming laps.

"Do you love it? It's your rock! I had it brought right here so you wouldn't have to go all the way out to the beach. Oh, you're so happy you can't speak!"

Chain Reaction
Susan O'Connell

African Atlas
Marion Braxton

father's

hate tear the fear
after her safe star has set
after her tears
after he fats her

hate tear the fear
after the fresh frets rest
after the rat farts
as the Fates stare
after the era

hate tear the fear
after father's heat
after father's hate
as the ash eats her heart
after father's feat

Angie Mickel

Waiting for the Vicar

It is Saturday evening
just about six when
I walk into John's Bar
with its constant reek of alcohol,
shed my plastic mac,
(it is raining again),
take a seat by the bar
(with its dings and rings),
order a glass of scotch,
take out a cigarette and begin to smoke.
For a time, I watch the smoke
rise like a blue haze
and nurse both drink and smoke alike.

Even with the whiskey in me
the man behind the bar
hardly looks like the sort I want to be with,
he is as ugly as sin,
but then again, I cater to most men's sins.

I turn my back to the bar,
cross hosed legs
and daintily pull my skirt over my knees.
I wear a shade of light blue,
Thomas's favorite colour.

I watch the men about me
get slowly debauched
under the blue snakes of tobacco smoke,
such an appropriate place to meet the vicar.

I look at my watch,
quarter after,
that bastard is late again.
Half after and he finally shows up.
It is time for me to do what
his beloved wife will not do for him.

Maire Eithne y Loynaz

Exponential Beauty

I use the Distance Formula of a line;
it determines the length of her shiny hair.
The diameter of her soft brown eyes
is equal to two times the radius.

I do not know the formula
for the curve of her tender cheek
or the volume of her full lips,
but isn't math a beautiful thing?

Christopher Yeargin

The Tree

From the day of my birth
the tree has silhouetted my stage
-- the background for my soliloquy.

Performing life,
Dancing and Shouting,
"I am a God!"
scene after scene
with all my triumphs and failures.

The tree
with milk chocolate bark
spiny green needles
droops with the Spanish moss
from the flashing kiss
of an oak that once graced its branches

-- And as I grow older
and somewhat less spirited,

my livelihood having been spent,
I gaze out the window from my deathbed

and see the tree that stood,
from beginning to end,

as I lie feeble and wretched,

as it grows stronger,

realizing that I was the tree's brief scenery.

John D. Trainor

Mother
Mary Ragan

Blossom

A new kitten, what fun! Now what
Shall we call her? She must have
A name--how will she know
When she's called to come out

From behind the chair
Out of the beer-box
Down from the windowsill
Up from the basement wherever

She's hiding. Chuck will call her
Damcat with a grin and
Pretend he's tossing her out while he
Gathers her up in his arms

For a rub. Why not ZIP? We usually
Name our cats ZIP. It would be only fair
To retire the name, and
Come up with a new one

For her. Anyway, she's orange when I called her
"Punkin'" she came running leaping landing
In the cradle of my thighs while I sat
Indian-style on the floor why not

Tigger. She has stripes, no she's a girl
Or maybe Flower, no you can't call a flower
Maybe flower names: Daisy, Rosie, no I'll
Call her Blossom remember

Miss Blossom and her store on
The island? And her funeral when the family

Threw flowers down in her grave and there
Was crying and gospel singing and the rope broke on

The coffin. Such a shout you never heard, I can
Hear it now, yes, her name will be
Blossom.

Lynn Mobley Eaton

Possibilities
Shelley Strickland

Kiss Good-Bye
Mary O'Sako

When I look out of the window of Patty's room, I rest my hand against the glass expecting a lingering warmth from the late summer sun that set mere hours ago. It is cold. I jerk my hand back. A premature autumn wind has arrived unseen to our little Ohio valley this night as my sister's illness rails on, pushing her on. It presses hard against the fragile glass of this fifth floor room so high above the rest of the hospital. I can see Patty's reflection in the bed behind me.

"It's okay, Patty. It's only the wind. Remember when mom would always call it the *Alberta Clipper*?" I giggle aloud. "The *Alberta Clipper*, no matter what time of year it was. I think she just liked the sound of it, don't you?"

Patty doesn't respond. She has been this way since they started the morphine drip on her this morning. *It'll put her out,* a nurse had said to me in a low voice while I'd stood watching Patty watch them. *Them*, the white clad squadron of four that had descended upon this room while the clock still displayed an a.m. hour, each with a different job pertaining to my sister. One nurse had been for the chest x-ray, one for the blood, one for starting the IV. So many to tend to one so slight, to pierce the pain-weary flesh with yet another needle, to prod ever gently, ever more. And still Patty had looked my way and smiled.

"I'm standing just over here, Pat," I call out. Pacing on tiptoes from the window to the bed, I pause somewhere close to her feet. I don't think she can see me. Her deep brown eyes with their cache of amber lights--their Patty lights--roll restlessly in her swollen face. Unseeing. The morphine has taken her to a place where her body that has grown tall and strong and beautiful for almost forty years is still just that. Maybe in that place she no longer looks out from this paralyzed form that is bending back into the shape and helplessness of infancy; feet that so loved to run and dance curl uselessly inward, hands that fluttered and darted like white butterflies before her as she spoke are cemented into fists, and a bottom once too modest for swimsuits is now bound in plastic diapers.

"Don't worry, Pat, this bumpy road ends somewhere. It'll

ease up soon," I whisper softly. Even a whisper echoes in this closet of a room, things are so close in here. "I promise." The air is wailing and pressing against the window glass again.

"Just that wind, Patty. It's okay." I bend over to touch her leg through the thin, hospital-issue blanket. It is such a fragile leg, this leg. It doesn't belong to my older sister, who has always been the mountain, always looming ahead, protecting my valley with her shadow. The first to walk, to date, to try a cigarette, to leave home, and now the first to die. How could this leg ever possibly support her weight again?

Patty's eyes roll sightlessly toward the fluorescent light above her bed then outward in a weak circle. Her mouth has fallen open and remains that way as she sucks for air. I stand watching her this way for a while, my arms tightly folded across my chest, grateful when my joints begin to stiffen--a small penance. I wonder if the pills that Pat swallowed so faithfully over the past months really eased her from the pain of staying too long within the confined spaces her illness would allow. Did such tiny pills help her body forget the toll of lying in bed, day after day while she was forced to watch the last of her minutes slip away? I look at the bottle of lotion there on the stand by her bed. I *could* help. I *could* massage her arms and legs right now for her, but she looks so much like Grandma did lying there like that. *Grandma*, God! Our Grandma who had lain in similar twisted form those years ago. *Never mind Grandma.* Never mind.

"Show me the way. . .," I begin to sing aloud to her instead, wondering if my voice can carry through such a great distance. It's her favorite song, from that Peter Frampton album she used to have. I stumble over the words and hum the rest. "God, Patty, you'd think I'd know this song backwards. Remember that apartment we shared back when we first left home? You used to play that damned thing over and over until I finally threatened to cut off my share of the electric bill. You didn't care, you made me get up and dance right along *with* you, you *shit.*"

Patty's laughter is already a memory. A laugh right now would probably split her lip in two. They are looking so dry that the skin is flaking off and I wonder if the ragged passage of air to and from her lungs is sawing away at her. I realize suddenly that she hasn't had a sip of water since this morning, when she'd asked for one in the Emergency room. That was before a member of *The*

Squadron had hooked her up to the flow of liquid stuff that quenches her now from within.

"It's not like a really good cup of water though, is it Pat?" I whisper. No, the small bag hanging there above her is definitely not a holy grail, it holds no promise of life as it coolly fills her veins.

Thanks, Mary. Oh, that's good, Patty had gasped after a long sip from the plastic cup of ice water I'd held carefully to her lips those eons ago. My fingers had trembled from the slight effort of holding the drink up for her. Up, upright and sitting is how the nurses had positioned her on the gurney, with straps criss-crossing her torso to keep her sagging body from flopping over. "It's more comfortable for her this way," a petite nurse had assured me as she bustled efficiently about Patty. "It's so she can breath easier."

You look like Hannibal the Cannibal all bound up like that, I'd joked, already sorry.

Yeah, well, go to hell, she'd breathed angrily. The pain and effort of dying had already stripped her to the bone.

Easy, honey. I'm just kidding. I'm--I'd shut my mouth when she'd looked at me. The daggers she'd thrown so helplessly with that look. *Save it, I'm dying and don't give a shit anymore*, flew soundlessly through the air, cutting heavily into me while they began to wheel Patty towards the elevator.

It's okay, Patty, I'll be right behind you, I'd called out to her just before the elevator doors closed. She'd looked up and smiled, a sad Raggedy-Ann smile. The iron bar around my chest had tightened a bit.

We'd said nothing more because the space around her had filled quickly with hospital-clad workers and there was no more room to stand. The doors had slid shut and she was gone, up to this white room of her final agony, hooked to the many tubes that sustain her now.

I push myself to move now toward the head of the bed, watching Patty's eyes as my joints crack loudly in the quiet. I realize that I've left my gloves at her house, the rubber gloves I had worn to protect her from things. To *protect*, I remind myself, and pause to think about raiding the nurses' station for a rogue pair, but that journey looks farther than I'd dare to venture. From the bottles, cards and make-up on her bedside table I quickly select the tube of chapstick and apply some to her lips, careful not to touch her skin with my fingertips. The warm passage of air that escapes her

laboring lungs caresses my skin and I pause there, bending over her and watching the Patty lights still trying to swim in circles within her eyes.

There is no scent of tea bags, rose water or urine surrounding Patty that I remember from Grandma's unconscious body. I guess some pictures never fade, no matter how much time they lie bare to exposure. Grandma, *our* Grandma, had taken ill in her home when we were still young and had stayed that way, bedridden and blind until the day she'd died. And always mom had made us kiss her good-bye after each visit. A single kiss to her marshmallow dry forehead before we could run back to our go-go boots and boyfriends.

There are none of those things here. I close my eyes and breath in Patty's moist scent. It is strangely sweet, soothingly so. For the hundredth time since I'd arrived to care for her three weeks ago, I try to place that smell. *Baby powder--no, lotion--no, soap--no, . . . Mock Orange blossoms--God, NO!*

Oh, Patty! I exchange the chap-stick for a nail file and force myself to sit in the chair at the side of her bed. Her nails have grown so long and yet have remained perfectly tapered pearls, not the yellowed claws poor Grandma had been left with.

"Don't worry, Pat, we'll get you fixed up," I whisper aloud then stroke her blanketed leg. I will tend to her nails and her make-up in a little while. There is still time. There has to be. Mom won't be in until five the next afternoon and my husband, Tim, is scheduled to come up for a visit at the end of the week. Of course I won't let them see her this way, especially when Patty has worried about it so much.

Don't let anyone in yet, she would say from the bed we'd set up in the living room back in her house, where she had lain for the past month watching the summer world fade too quickly beyond her window. *Please don't let anyone see me this way*, she would plead, when the crunch of a mail truck could be heard echoing loudly throughout those closed, warm rooms.

It's all right, Patty, I won't, I would tell her. Those huge eyes made larger by the absence of dark hair and lashes would relax and the pale skin of her face would melt back into her pillows until the next time.

And so had begun the downside of her existence. Each morning I'd risen from the couch near her bed where I'd taken up

residence, called from a light sleep by the harsh ring of an alarm clock set to remind us of the next round of pills. Always there were the pills. And each morning we went through the routine we'd agreed upon without words. I'd snap on my gloves and begin. In order of importance the list included medication first--pills ground into applesauce to ease the journey inward; bathing and changing next--very slowly to allow ever stiffening limbs to settle into each new position as quietly as the pain would allow; make-up last, a treatment that included eyeliner and lipstick. After this could I open the blinds, and then we would check the make-up again in the light of day. Patty would look at her reflection with glazed eyes that I couldn't read or understand. She would just nod and look away. Then and only then could the gloves come off.

Just to protect her skin, I'd tell myself.

Patty remained ready. Her last days wore on without interruptions, the television set blaring a soothing stream of idiocy until the sounds of that mailman's tread hit her ears. It fast became a routine.

You look beautiful, Pat. Everything is fine.

Your sure I don't look like shit? I don't want anyone feeling sorry, not like with Grandma.

Lord no, you're not like that at all!

I want to see.

Here, look. Up would come the ever ready hand mirror for her inspection.

You did a pretty good job. Okay. It's okay then, I guess, she would say with a smile. *Thanks, you're an angel, Mare.*

You're welcome, Pat. I would wink and touch her leg through the blankets. Always through the blankets. *Now we're ready for anything.*

Yep.

Of course no one ever came. My husband and I live in Georgia and I'd arrived alone and uncertain at the airport, dragging my suitcases impatiently through the tangles of strangers with their loud talk and laughter, intent on staying the distance, whatever the distance might be. The tears had come and gone in sufficient deluge later that first night in the shower after I'd learned that none of the aunts or uncles had been around to see her in weeks, and visits from friends had become sparse as her illness progressed. Aside from Mom's letters, a few cards had appeared out there in her mailbox

each week, and that was nice. I mean, doesn't a *Hallmark* always seem to suffice? Why face death when you can keep it as far from you as the cost of a single stamp. Pennies for pain. It was as if the cancer had been devouring her existence long before it would finish with her body.

"Well, now, Patricia," I say lightly, "Mom will be here tomorrow. Tim is coming at the end of the week. He got time off from work just to come and see you--he misses you. And you have a new card that was in the mailbox when we left. I'll read it to you later when you wake up. Then we can look at it together, okay?"

I still grip the nail file tightly in my hand.

"Don't worry about a thing. We'll get you fixed up and when you go home we'll have you looking like a Queen. And I'll make us some of those root beer floats you liked so much. Shoot, I still think you ought to just come back to Georgia with me and Tim instead of living all alone in that house. I'll fix you up with some guy or something. . . ." I lean back in the chair. There. I can see the occasional stream of visitors that pass by Patty's room. They are just flitting shadows out there in the darkness of the corridor, like moths, oblivious to all but their own. They dwindle in number as the hour grows late.

I think about turning on the television set to Patty's favorite program and can't remember what day it is--and that's important because there were certain shows assigned to certain days. There is *Jeopardy!* on Mondays, *The Nanny* on Tuesdays--wait, that's it. Today is Tuesday. I rise to turn it on then remember that cable service won't be turned on in this room until after seven the next morning. Some new thing they do to avoid extra cost.

"Well, Pat," I sigh, "you're stuck with me." I sit forward at the edge of the chair and hum the Frampton tune again. Patty still breathes in her washboard rhythm. I close my eyes.

You okay, Patty? Can I get you anything?

Oh, no. No. Just sit with me, Mare, she would sigh. We are back in the living room of that house again. The muscles in her face had grown more taut with her suffering. *I'm sorry to be such a bother, I know this is no way to live*, she'd say through clenched teeth.

Oh please. You're no bother at all. I'm the bother, hanging around you all the time. Let's see. I'd approached her bedside table with its forest of brown prescription bottles and stooped to read the

chart we'd made to sort out the doses. *Okay, well. It's okay to try another pair of these*, I'd said, holding up the bottle of white codeine tablets. They were supposed to numb any renegade pain that managed to escape each carefully timed barrage of morphine. Morphine was the big gun but even it had grown weak in the face of the enemy. So soon, the pills had been wearing out so soon.

I'd called her doctor.

Just follow the orders on the bottles as they are, the extra codeine is fine, her doctor, Doctor P. W. Pass, had recited to me in a monotone. *I know what's going on in her lungs. You can call an ambulance if she can't tolerate them, or if there is any other evident change.* Change? After I'd hung up, Patty's eyes had quietly followed the path of the bottle in my hand.

He says it's okay.

She'd nodded.

Now, just relax, Pat. It's easier when you try to relax, I'd coaxed, waiting with teaspoon poised in the air while she swallowed in anticipation of the medicine, her entire body flexing with the effort. I'd touched her shoulder through the cloth of her T-shirt. Always through the cloth.

It's okay? It's okay to relax? Patty would repeat with a light lilt to her voice that didn't belong to her while I nodded and placed the teaspoon of applesauce containing its crushed codeine tablets onto her tongue. She'd accepted it as reverently as a child receiving first communion, eyes and face wide open and waiting for the miracle that was certain to happen within.

"It's okay *now*, Pat. It's okay to relax," I whisper aloud. Her breathing has become heavier, more labored. Her chin has dropped almost to her chest in the unconscious fight for what little bit of life she has left. "And listen to that old wind out there, it just keeps on whining. Probably mourning summer. Summer, lord. Seems like just yesterday it was June." I talk quietly as the wind rises again. June. I have begun to hate June. That's when I'd heard her tell me that death was a certainty. She'd finally said it with words, and you can't dodge words like those. They were as hard as bullets. There were to be no more guesses or outs, only blind hope.

Hey, Mary, how's everything in Georgia? Patty's voice had been too full of cheer. It had been the first week in June, the fourth day of June. Only three months ago. So close in time and space.

Fine. Fine. Flowers are out, the sun is shining. What's up in Ohio? I'd answered, my voice high with an anxiety that I tried to pass off for some false high spirits of my own.

Oh, everything's going okay. You get any of those Mock-Orange blossoms out yet?

What? Mock-Orange blossoms? Yeah, I think so. I'd stood on my tip-toes and peered out the window. *Yeah, they're out there.* The delicate branches of my only Mock-Orange tree indeed bore tiny white blossoms. *How about Ohio?*

Nope. Not until the end of June or beginning of July, depends on the weather. We're a little behind you guys. Hey! Remember what Grandma used to say about them, Scary Mary? She'd laughed loudly into the phone and I'd cringed. She hadn't called me "Scary Mary" in a long time. The nickname had been earned years ago when I'd fainted at Grandma's funeral.

No, I don't remember, I'd lied, pinching the phone cord and wondering if it would cut us off.

Sure you do. 'When I smell the Mock-Orange boosh, then I know someone will die,' she'd drawled in what I remembered of Grandma's Hungarian accent.

Stop it. Your scaring me!

Oh, come on, Scary Mary! Why was it she'd always said that? Because Grandpa and the damned dog both died in June?

You know Mom hates it when we mock Grandma and her orange 'booshes." It's about speaking ill of the dead, or some horse shit like that.

Oh, please! You're the one who was disrespectful fainting at her funeral and shit. Remember? Mom made you kiss old Granny good-bye and you fainted right there on the floor at Borowski's Funeral Parlor. You took that nice pot of sunflowers from Aunt Ray down with you. You even had dirt in your hair. That was a classic episode--OH! and everyone saw *your big ass, you were wearing your blue panties with the Monday on it and it was Thursday! I thought I'd die then! I thought Mom would, too, she was so humiliated!*

That's enough!

But it was funny!

You didn't have to kiss her or even touch her! Besides, I was only fifteen.

I was only seventeen.

I'd never seen a body!

Me, either.

And half the people there who saw my big ass were women. They don't count. Neither does Uncle Donald because he's gay.

He is?

Shut up.

Ha! She'd laughed shrilly into the phone.

Why are you bringing all of this up, Pat? I don't want to talk about that crap, it's ridiculous now. Let's talk about you. What's going on?

Sorry. It just seemed funny and I needed to laugh. I'm sorry it was at you, Mare.

It's not that funny, is it? Oh, it's all right, forget it. Is everything okay? How are you doing with those treatments?

Yes. I'm fine. Actually, no. No. I'm not. They stopped the chemo, Mare.

"Mary."

I jump from my muse. I hadn't heard the nurse come into the room. I must have been dozing. It's the same nurse who'd been on call that morning when Patty had been tucked away into this room. *Patty*. I look past the petite woman to Patty. Her eyes are still open and searching.

"I'm sorry. Were you sleeping? You know you can lie down in the bed next to your sister's. We won't put anyone else in here, so you will have some privacy."

"No. No, I'm awake. Thanks. Don't you ever get to go home?"

"Sure," she laughed. "Just working a double. Listen, there's plenty of fresh coffee down there too. Feel free. . ."

"Okay." I smile and stand, stumbling slightly against the chair as I make room for the nurse to get by. She checks the plastic bags that feed into Patty's body, touching them like a housewife checking her clothesline for dry articles. Next she wets up a sponge and wipes Patty's forehead then touches it gently to Patty's lips. *She's* not wearing gloves. But then, who did the gloves really protect?

"I did the chapstick thing earlier. Her mouth stays so dry," I blurt out suddenly.

The nurse smiles and nods. "That's good for her. Remember, if you need anything we are right outside."

I smile back at her and wait until she leaves the room before I sit back down. My watch says eleven.

"Been a long day, Patty," I say, settling back into the chair. I stroke her blanket covered leg again. Patty had stopped swallowing

just before dawn, during the four a.m. round of pills. The laced applesauce had lain unnoticed on her lips and some had fallen in fat drops upon her pillow as she'd smiled and began to talk about things that had no end. Her mind was rewinding.

I want to go home, where's home. Grandma--where's Mom? I want Mom! Oh, God, help me, God. What's that dress, Mare? Are those kids playing in the street again? Oh, God, I can't die now. This is, where is, Oh God, I'm late again, so late, is funny so, did you see that flower looks like a star, hey Mare? Where's, oh, God . .

It's okay, Pat, I would interrupt, touching the mound that was her foot beneath the blanket. And she would come back into her self for a moment and look directly at me with those brown eyes that she'd inherited from Grandma. Grandma. But my Patty couldn't be going there. That was a place of terrible cold, where flesh once marshmallow soft had turned to stone. *And, Oh God, Grandma's eyes had been closed when I'd kissed her that last time and she'd had no scent at all.* And mom made me kiss her anyway.

You'll show some respect; you'll kiss your poor Grandma, Mom had hissed, twisting the flesh of my arm while I'd stared at that corpse. That hadn't been Grandma. In her place, in that pink satin lined coffin, lay a crude replica of her person: thick undertaker's make-up lavished generously over its waxy skin, bright rouge on the overstuffed cheeks, and the lips stretched and pinned into an unnaturally straight line. Most of all it had been the non-smell that had gotten to me and turned out the lights. Enveloped in moist cold air with the empty scent of refrigerated flowers mingling with refrigerated flesh, it had filled my nostrils and my mind with a numbing dose of fear. My lips had brushed cold stone and I'd fainted.

"God, Patty. And now we can still laugh about Grandma, can't we?" I say aloud to her, not thinking. I lean forward and straighten the edge of her blanket. The bed next to hers is empty. I think about lying down and that I should go and wheel that bed closer to hers first so I can hear if she needs me, or to be close so that I could answer the phone should it ring. The phone. I realize the last time I used the phone was to call the ambulance this morning, after she'd forgotten to swallow the very stuff she'd come to live for.

I've called the doctor, Pat. He said we should bring you in to regulate your medication, I'd lied. *It's nothing to worry about.*

Her weary eyes had rested so heavily upon me and I understood that she knew everything. I could feel her inward sigh. It

was time. *Oh, okay,* she'd said plainly, *is everything all right? When are they coming?*

Soon. Don't worry, we'll get you ready.

I'd pulled on the rubber gloves and quickly got her ready, grateful for the pain in my back as I shifted her weight. It was more penance. We finished by pulling on a fresh T-shirt, the wig and some make-up. Just before the ambulance arrived I'd removed the gloves. I'd caught Patty watching me as I tossed them away. She'd chuckled softly.

Scary Mary, she'd whispered, her dark eyes gleaming.

My hands are rough, I don't want to scratch your skin.

She'd winked at me. *It's okay, Mare.*

The ambulance had pulled up then and the dark morning hours had now disappeared into the jaws of the evening. It was as if the afternoon had never been. She had been cheated, we had both been cheated.

"Well, Patricia. It's after eleven. You don't mind if I sit here and talk to you some more?" I whisper, pulling the chair closer to the side of the bed.

"We'll have to tend to your garden when we get back. I'll wheel you out into the sun. I don't know why I didn't think of it before--we can get that visiting nurse to help. Those ambulance guys really trampled your Mock-Orange 'boosh,' Pat. The one by the front steps. Oh well. Crazy idea to plant Grandma's bushes there anyhow. I'm surprised they lasted as long as they did in that spot, but maybe you'd like to try some nice roses there."

Patty's wig has been knocked slightly askew and before I can retrieve it, she stops breathing. I freeze. Her eyes cease to move; she has taken a pause. A flower closing in on itself. The gurgling in her lungs is silent. Seconds churn into the hours of a minute while we wait.

"Patty!" I call to her, leaning over the bed railing. I reach out and tug on her foot. The eyes move inward and she slowly, laboriously, begins to breath again. I hurry to the door and stop, then I return to the bed with its cargo. There is a chart tainted with a red DNR order hanging there, at the foot of her bed, framed by the sounds of her labored breathing. *Do not resuscitate.* Patty's signature sprawls in a delicate line across the bottom of the black and white page. She has even made those little o's for dots above the i's, the same way she'd done so in the letters she'd written to me over the

years. Her girlish handwriting just doesn't belong there. I pick it up and look at it, then let it fall back against the bed with a small bang.

"I'm sorry, Patty."

She toils on, oblivious to everything above the throes of her death snore. *Scary Mary.* I move to the side of the bed and pick up the fallen nail file. I smooth the edge of her pillow, getting ever closer. My heart is pounding. Pat's hand is sticking halfway out from beneath the blankets. I touch her fingers with my bare ones, marveling at the warmth. There. There is nothing of harsh dryness and cold, terrible moistness here. Stupid, stupid to think that there is, that there was. Slipping the file gently beneath the nail of her thumb, I begin to file.

"Show me the way. . . day after day. . ." I sing softly. My voice is shaky.

I close my eyes and breath deeply her sweet scent. "I'm so sorry, Patty. It is okay to relax." *Forget Grandma, forget the cold.* Patty's breathing is like a slow cadence. I stop filing and sit on the edge of her bed. It's so quiet. Even the wind has stopped for awhile. Only the tiny beep of her monitor pulses out the presence of time while we wait. I decide it's too quiet.

"Remember when you sat with me after I had my tonsils out? I was twenty-one and I puked all over you," I tell her, laughing aloud. "*I* remember." Patty's was the first voice I'd heard when I'd awakened from that drug-sleep.

Relax, Scary Mary, she'd said. Patty had spoken from the side of the bed where I'd lain with my throat searing. The world had been spinning and so had my stomach. While I'd vomited noisily over the bed railing she'd held on fast to my hand.

Relax? I must look like shit, I'd croaked, holding my sore belly steady while the nurses pulled a fresh gown over my head.

Don't worry, Mare. We'll get it, Patty had chirped. I can still smell her perfume, something lilac. She'd stayed with me, dabbing my cheeks, wiping my arms, brushing my tangled hair. How the feel of her hands in my hair had worked better than any sedative. My eyes had drooped with the long, luxurious strokes of that brush.

". . . show me the way. . ." I sing again, my voice rising as loud as I dare within the walls of this room, chasing out the shadows of the past. I hold her hand and stroke the length of her arms slowly.

". . . day after day. . ."

Patty's chest rattles to a stop once more. I bend over her face, closing my eyes and waiting for the feel of the warmth that doesn't come. I wait, but there is no sound. No movement. I know that she has died. In the far distance the wind has begun to move again, but it flows more peacefully by our window and I wonder if *she* now moves with it, caught up in its soothing balm, perhaps traveling like a little being in a fairy tale; free to become as she pleases, a fragrant petal of a rose here, the boundless wing of a dragonfly there.

Patty is dead. Dead. That word doesn't belong with my sister. Not yet. I can hear the occasional swish of hospital personnel moving by in the distance but we don't see them. Patty's eyes stare blindly, her mouth gapes quietly. I lean and look closely into those eyes, my forehead touching hers. Searching. The Patty lights are gone; a milky glaze has begun to settle over the depth of the brown, quieting her forever.

"Pat," I whisper and place my hand flat on her chest. One tiny sound escapes from deep within her. It is only a final gasp of trapped air from her ruined lungs. It escapes to become part of the atmosphere, as invisible as a soul must be. I reach to smooth the wig, allowing my hand to caress the still warm softness of her skin. As the tears come, my hand takes on a life of its own, stroking first her brow, then her cheeks.

"They'll be here soon to check on you. But it's okay, Patty, we'll fix you up first," I say while I gather her make-up from the suitcase in the corner. I take my time and smooth the base on first, rubbing it over her brow, then her cheeks and chin. Next comes the eyeshadow, an earth tone that she once told me wouldn't contrast with the brown in her eyes, her favorite pink lipstick, and some eyebrow pencil, dabbing and blotting with my fingertips. I pull out a brush from my purse and arrange the hair carefully around her face.

"There," I whisper, finishing. "There, you've got Grandma beat by a mile, sister. A long mile. Look, it's already September."

Last of all, I bend and kiss her gently on the forehead.

Lily
Sara E. Goodson

The Emperor of Self

Soul Friend
Blood Enemy
Faceless Crowd
I cannot hear you
I cannot see you
I cannot believe you
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Disdain not I
with these hands
to build midnight Cathedrals
brooding upon griffin-wall'd cities
of hippogriff gate and celluloid street
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Molding the Earth of half-remember'd Dream
aflame with memory, desire, and sacred belief
I populate my soul with
Man, Woman, Child, and Creature of the Dawn
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Ice Cream Kings, Aged Virgin Queens
Worshippers of the World Snake
Pine needle dryads
Manticore peasants
Friends garbed in the rainbow silk of
Fantasy, bend not the knee to me
For I am the Emperor of Self.

And in dark-leaved forests of oak and thorn
I plant crimson-fur wolves, philosopher ogres,
and the Good Folk who laugh at the ways of Man.
My azure skies fly with gold-scal'd
Dragons and never seen Rocs while
Mermaids of foam-flecked tresses
Cavort with leviathans in crystal seas
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Cement-gray armies starve not my Soul
nor drown me in Baptist rivers of His blood
Because Byzantium is my right hand
and Persia my left
And the god-dog, Cerberus, is
my friend and childhood pet
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Soul Friend
Blood Enemy
Faceless Crowd
God songs and Child wonders I sing
with faltering tongue and ink-stain'd hands
And you listen
or laugh
or scorn
or cry
or turn away
or not
For I am the Emperor of Self.

Michael Williams

Castles In the Backdrop, Scurrying Monks

Somewhere in Rome--at Castlebreak, perhaps
Wild ivy and black berries ran away from a dank prison
While an old man with a buttercup
Danced until the chimes called.
He heard the thunderous hooves
And felt cold mud leap to his body.
He heard men grunt and yell
And he clenched his teeth and closed his eyes
As metal clanged against metal
And blood was tossed aside for pleasure.
The ivy and blackberries and daffodils trampled
While the chimes screamed.
They were small, hanging from the cottage
And swaying in the breeze.
They are gentle and delicate,
Those small metallic pipes
that feel like glass
But signal the end.

Jennifer Durre

Self Portrait
Jennifer Cohen

Life From a Front Row Seat

No decision till Friday, I try to explain,
I speak before Congress, but my words are in vain.
The Ghosts in the bathroom will find me again.

First comes my father, who calls for more beer,
The ghost of my brother! What's he doing here?
Then I see me, from the past, a pioneer!

The storm is raging--gripped by fear, I must crawl--
I'm outside! I can see the old garden wall,
But it's too far away, and I am made small.

Suddenly I'm flying at a dizzying pace
To the shack in the woods -- to a safe place.
I'll hide in the shade of the monument base.

Pulled from my car, I hear myself scream--
Where's the army? In the barracks! With cake and whipped cream!
Oh God, what a circus! This must be a dream!

Lynn Mobley Eaton

Things I Should Have Done

Planted flowers instead of buying them.
Yelled when I felt the need.
Regularly embraced the ones I loved.
Celebrated Grandparent`s Day.
Repaired repairable friendships.
Continued this poem.

Anslee Willett

Tybee
March 3, 1997

Sand and waves, Flyers turn
against the porcelain sky,
spreading nylon pinions
to embrace the wind with rainbow wings.

Dip, swirl, bank, coast,
swooping like psychedelic angels
in the bright March afternoon;
carrying fantasies of watchers to the heavens.

C.R. UwasahaAgeya

Wasting Time

Wasting time --
I've spent too many hours
in the courtyard --
Drinking the fruits of my labor

The beautiful springtime girls
have bloomed,
Waiting to be picked
and adorned.

I sit --

Engulfing the scent of sweet perfume
-- and flesh. . .

that clings to my libido
as easily as it slips
from the slink in their walk.

Come closer --

we touch,
while spring is in the air . . .

and we can, for a moment,

our moment together,

waste time.

John D. Trainor

From a Distance
Debra Sutton

A Tale of Her Own

Dori Gann

Once upon a time, long, long ago and in a land far away, there lived a little girl whose name was Aurora. She lived with her family in a close little town, and had a normal childhood like all the other boys and girls she knew. From the time that Aurora was old enough to understand, she had been told by her parents that the greatest thing a young maiden could do was marry a king. This would bring great prestige to the town and bestow tremendous wealth on the parents of a girl lucky enough to be chosen for such an honor. So Aurora, like all her friends, dreamed of a handsome knight in shining armor who would whisk her away to a beautiful kingdom where they would live happily ever after.

One day, when Aurora was older, the news came to the town that a very wealthy and powerful king would be traveling the countryside in the near future, looking for a maiden to make his bride. This news greatly excited Aurora's parents, and they set about instructing their daughter in the fine art of capturing such a wonderful thing as a king. "Always look fresh and alluring," said her mother. "Never contradict him," said her father."You must pamper him and always lavish attention on him," Aurora's mother advised. "Just remember, every man must always be a king in his castle," came the advice from her father.

At long last, the big day arrived. All the eligible girls were laced into their best frocks and paraded up and down in front of the king. The girls pranced and twirled, hoping to catch the king's eye, and Aurora, because she had practiced very hard for this, outshone them all. She was meek and demure with just the right amount of feminine mystery hinted at with a wink of the eye and a flirtatious flip of her skirt. She had, after all, been preparing for this all her life. Finally it was here. The big moment when all her dreams could come true, if only she could catch her man.

When the king chose Aurora, she could scarcely believe it. What an honor! How lucky she was! Aurora just knew her future was set, she would be a queen! The whole town cheered and waved as Aurora rode off in the king's carriage. How the other girls envied her. Aurora's parents were quite proud that they had raised such a

successful daughter, and bid her fond farewell. When Aurora saw the kingdom she was to live in, she was ecstatic. How beautiful everything was, and the castle was an incredible sight to behold. Built high upon a hill, it overlooked the entire kingdom. Rising majestically from a dark patch of forest, the castle seemed to shimmer and shift in the afternoon haze. As Aurora rose closer, she couldn't believe her good luck. To be a queen in a kingdom such as this. What more could she ever desire? Flags and banners lightly fluttered in the breeze from the tops of the many towers and turrets, and the trees seemed to bow to the carriages as the procession wound closer and closer to the castle.

On the night of Aurora's marriage to the king, she was ushered to his chambers. Inside the room, all was dark and silent as the door was locked behind her. The day's events had been a blur, and having spoken no more than two words to the king the entire time since leaving her home, Aurora was a little nervous. However, she was confident that the king must be a wonderful man, for didn't everyone want to be the king's wife? Having been thoroughly prepared for this big event by her mother, Aurora shook out her hair, licked her lips and struck--what she thought was--a provocative pose. Suddenly, from out of the shadows, loomed a huge, dark figure. My! The king certainly did appear frighteningly large, but Aurora remembered her mother vaguely mentioning something about the size not counting. But Aurora felt that there was something strange going on, and then she suddenly realized that this wasn't the king, this was a dreadful dragon! The dragon regarded her with beady little eyes that paralyzed Aurora in the spot where she stood. And then, in a hot, foul breath, the dragon told Aurora that he was indeed the king, and he fell upon her and ravished her. When he was done, the dragon took his mighty tail and squeezed it around Aurora's slender neck until she passed out; just to show her he loved her.

When she came to, she was locked in a tower with only a brush and a mirror, and a small case of cosmetics, so that she could stay fresh and alluring for her husband, of course. And so went Aurora's life. What an honor, how lucky she was! Aurora's days were spent in mindless wanderings around and around the great tower that was her home. Where could she go? How could she escape? And even if she did, who would believe her incredible tale of a king who was a dragon? She couldn't return home; the shame she would bring to her family was more than she could bear to think

of. Imagine, a girl running home away from the king; people would say she was crazy.

So Aurora stayed where she was and tried to convince herself that things weren't so bad. After all, she was a queen, wasn't she? What an honor, what a lucky girl! Somehow, those words didn't sound quite the same anymore. Then, one day a fairy godmother appeared before Aurora. In her hand she held a golden key. "If you search, you shall find; the way to freedom, in your mind," she told the miserable girl. "Use your head, and do not fear; there is a secret to learn here." Well, this was good news to Aurora, who hadn't quite been able to convince herself that she had the perfect marriage, and just the thought of that hot and slimy tail wrapping around her neck one more time was enough to convince her that she'd rather jump from a window to her death than stay in the tower any longer.

At the very top of the tower was a dark little hallway that Aurora had never bothered to explore, and at the end was a door that had several old and dusty boards nailed across it. The door was covered in layers of cobwebs, and Aurora could tell that it hadn't been opened in years. A small sign hung crookedly on the door that read, "Do not enter, by decree of the King." She pulled off the boards, and cautiously she inserted the key and turned; the door swung silently inward. A soft light beckoned Aurora inside. As she stepped over the threshold, a strange feeling began swelling up inside of her. Magic seemed to sparkle in the very air that filled the room. Books lined the walls in stacks and seemed to breathe a life of their own. As Aurora began to run her hands over the books in wonder, all the contents held in the pages seemed to flow from her fingers to her brain. Time seemed to stand still and Aurora trembled in shock. She learned so much, she felt sure that her head must surely explode. Aurora suddenly realized that she had as much magic within her as did the evil king. She knew in an instant that the king believed his magic was in his tail and that having such a mighty tail was what made him so powerful. But Aurora knew better now; the magic was inside of everyone. It had nothing to do with having a tail; the magic just needed to be recognized within and encouraged to grow. Aurora also knew that her magic was much stronger than the dragon's; her magic came through truth and knowledge, and the King's magic was based on his false belief that his great tail made him superior.

When the king came to the tower that night, Aurora was waiting for him. She stood in the shadows with her hands folded primly in front of her and her head bowed. When the dragon swung his head around and directed his leering gaze on her, she swung up her mirrored compact and pointed it at his face. The evil king's eyes met a reflection of themselves in Aurora's compact, and froze him where he stood. Aurora rushed around the helpless dragon and up to his tail. "Doesn't seem all that big up close," she thought to herself. And with a ferocious swing, Aurora brought down the nail file she held in her hand and sliced off the dragon's tail. When the dragon saw he had lost his tail, he became so angry that he broke the spell he had put himself under, and whirled around towards Aurora. With an angry bellow, he rushed at her, and when she deftly stepped to the side, the dragon plunged headfirst out the window behind her and fell to the ground with a thud. Aurora rushed to the window and peered out; far below her lay the broken body of the dead king. And so, Aurora became queen of the beautiful kingdom. She brought peace and sexual equality to all her royal subjects, opened up the magical room at the top of the tower to everyone in the land, and they all lived happily ever after. What a lucky girl!

Untitled
Katrina Deckle

The Scent of Vanilla

Maryanna Axson

Alton walks in with a huge smile on his face, so I put down my cross stitch and ask him how things went.

"It was nice. It seems so strange to be telling you this, but I really liked it." He scratches his ear and wanders over to the vast window. Scanning dreamily over the luminous city spread out below, he has a beautiful child-like glow in his eyes. He deserves everything in this world that sparkles with joy.

He turns his body toward me and leans against the gray overstuffed couch. "She's different from you, she's really quiet and she keeps her eyes closed. Everything is movement with her, it's all easy and fluid. But she also likes to be kissed on the back of her neck, the same way you do." He flashes me that same deeply dimpled smile that hooked me years ago.

I'm smiling wide at Alton, drawing up mental images of him caressing a smooth, graceful younger woman. My mouth tastes hot and metallic, but I decide not to mention this to him.

"Well that shows that she's got great taste. I mean, besides the obvious fact that she's attracted to you. I'm glad you had a good time last night," I say as I pack away my embroidery floss and needles into a basket. I push them under a table to my left and stand up to stretch. "My muscles feel all tense, Alton. Could you give me a back rub?" My face must look pitiful, because he makes a pouty-baby face and walks gently up to me to cup my cheeks between his hands.

"You look beautiful, Cynthia." He kisses my mouth and his eyes are crawling all over my face, in search of something. "Is that all you have to say about last night? 'I'm glad you had a good time?'" He looks sort of worried and I know he wants the truth.

"I guess it is. I mean, once I go out and have my turn, I'll be better able to relate, honey," I say as I turn away from him and pace at half speed around the large parlor in our Manhattan apartment. "Right now I guess I just don't know how it feels to be in your situation."

My eyes are searching the ornate black ceiling tile fourteen feet above me for some magic word that will free me. I don't really want to discuss our outside relationships until I have one, too. Even

if it's not really a "relationship" in the regular sense of the word. I knew he'd find a woman before I would. I just would rather talk about it after I find a lovely, strong woman like myself, even if it's only for physical experience.

The ceiling isn't helping me.

"Cyn, I know you're probably worried about the fact that Yvette is younger than you. But that's one of the reasons that you and I have been together for so long. I want to share my life with someone my age, someone who I can relate to on all levels. Sure, I can relate to Yvette on a physical level, but not much beyond that."

Alton presses himself thoughtfully into the gray loveseat across the room and pulls a quarter out of the breast pocket of his green plaid shirt. He's twirling the quarter through his knuckles over and over again, the way he always has since he quit smoking four years ago.

"You know, I really want this to work. Are you sure you're okay with everything?" His voice sounds so smooth and deep, and it relaxes me.

"Alton," I say, curling myself up next to him, "I'm glad we decided to have an open relationship. I want you to have everything you want. I want you to experience every opportunity life brings you." I'm snuggling my face into his neck, and I can feel the ends of his short hair gently prickling my nose. He smells like vanilla. I lift my eyes to look at his face. After sixteen years, he still has the same smooth skin and strong jawbone that first tempted me. Our eyes match gazes, and I see some gold flecks in his eyes that I never noticed before.

"Don't feel like you have to sacrifice anything for me," Alton says as he drops his quarter. "This open relationship is for both of us. I mean, I want you to have everything you want, too." He's looking at me with those gold-flecked eyes and raised eyebrows.

"I don't think I'm sacrificing anything for you, honey." My fingers are toying with a loose string hanging out of the cushion on the couch. "I guess I just knew that you would find someone to sleep with before I would. I'm too nervous to just go up to someone and tell her that I'm attracted to her. I mean, where in the hell is a forty-four year old woman supposed to go to meet another woman?" I can't help but laugh when I hear myself saying this. "Seriously, I

really want to meet someone," I say as I stretch myself across his lap. "I just don't know how."

"I'm not sure what to tell you. I guess you just have to dive right in and do it. He's massaging my shoulders with his strong, tranquilizing hands, and I feel myself growing tired.

"I think I'm ready for bed, Alton." I pick myself up from his lap and head for the bedroom, pulling him behind me with my left hand.

For some reason I'm always dead tired before I get in the bed, and then I can't fall asleep. So I end up just lying here with thoughts parading through my mind, like I am now. I have an entire scenario composed in my mind: I'm standing there on the cold ceramic tile floor in my bathroom here in the apartment, with the chrome fixtures all polished and the black towels hanging perfectly straight. My lover pushes the door open and asks, "What's taking so long? Are you finished washing your face?" She looks the same in all of my dreams--tall, with dark hair, dark eyes, beautiful breasts and a flat stomach. The cold tile and the sight of this woman give me goosebumps, even under the covers of my queen-sized bed.

"Yea, I'm finished." I'm looking at her stomach peek through the gap between her t-shirt and low-waisted jeans. "Actually, I'm kind of cold," I say. "Do you want to take a shower with me to warm up?"

Without really answering, she goes ahead and pulls off her white V-neck t shirt and I find myself face to face with this sleek, voluptuous woman in a mint green bra and jeans. I don't think I've ever seen anything so perfect. I turn around to turn the hot water on and I can feel her standing close behind me. As I turn back to face her, my eyes are fixed on hers, and our bare toes are touching. God, the feeling is surreal to me and I can feel my face and ears going numb.

I roll over in the bed and rub my nose, trying to get circulation going again, and in the process wake Alton up. "I love you, baby," he mumbles, then buries his face into the pillow and falls back asleep.

Closing my eyes again, I see myself standing behind my lover in the shower. She has a tattoo, a Celtic knot centered between her shoulder blades. My soapy fingers trace along the smooth,

intertwined lines of the tattoo and then down along her spine. Our hands, our lips, our fingers are everywhere, all over each other, kissing and touching and even laughing out loud.

As I lie in bed imagining all this happening to me, I can't help but wonder where I even met this woman, or if she even exists. I roll onto my stomach and ponder ways that I could possibly find a woman like her--a woman like myself.

My fluffy gray cat startles me awake by leaping onto my stomach from the floor. The sunlight is pouring into the bedroom, and I strain my eyes to see the clock across the room. 10:21. Alton's at work, at his office at Simon, Lange, and Hansen attorneys. I shuffle into the kitchen to brew some coffee and to feed my demanding cat, who won't stop harassing me until I do. Sitting down at the table, waiting for the coffee to brew, I contemplate the possibilities of our open relationship. I guess Alton and I have never really had an "ordinary" relationship. First off, we've been together for sixteen years and have never really had a true desire to get married. We used to stay up half the night discussing this whole open relationship thing as if we were talking about other people or something. I looked up at him from the chair I'm sitting in now. "How come we both agree that that's the best arrangement, but we haven't ever done it ourselves?"

Alton stood still--I think he was letting the words sink in--and turned to face me. "So are you saying you want to start an open relationship?" He stood there, scrambling eggs, looking at me with a small smile on his face.

"Yea, I think so. I mean, there's no reason not to, is there?" I remember waiting, thinking of the words carefully: "I know we could both enjoy sleeping with other women, and we both deserve to."

He looked at me with those beautiful eyes of his, and I remember thinking that he had never looked so in love as he did at that moment--his skin seemed to glow in a fresh pink color and his dimples punctuated his smile.

"Then let's go for it, Cynthia." He brought over my plate of eggs and pancakes and set it down in front of me, kissing my cheek.

I knew then that as much as I want to, finding a woman would be difficult for me.

When Alton comes home from work, I'm sitting in the dining room, working on a puzzle of the Sistine Chapel. He asks me how my day has been.

"Well, it's been okay, I guess," I say, digging through the box of mismatched pieces. "What do you plan on doing tonight?"

He throws his coat over one of the chairs and loosens his tie. "Well, Yvette called on my lunch hour and asked me if I wanted to go have some coffee with her when she gets off work tonight." He picks up the cat and scratches her neck, waiting for my response.

"Oh. Okay," I say. I'm still digging for that nonexistent missing piece.

"Let me tell you about the idea I got today," he says, pulling out a chair and sitting next to me. "How would you feel about meeting Yvette? I know you've had problems meeting women, and I think the two of you would have a lot in common."

I look up at Alton and scratch my head thoughtfully.

"I mean, she knows you know about her, so I don't think she'd be nervous around you, and she's told me that the idea kind of turns her on." I reach for my cigarettes and light one up. "At the very least, Cynthia, you'd feel more comfortable, don't you think?"

"So you want me to go have coffee with the two of you tonight?"

"Sure." He picks my hand up and kisses my palm. "If you want to."

I sit in silence for a few moments. The idea does kind of intrigue me--I've been wondering what exactly turns him on about her. And anyway, if I don't like her for myself, at least I'll know more about their relationship. It can't hurt.

"Okay," I finally say, "I guess I can do that. She just better not be sexier than me." I smile and take my hand back and return to my puzzle for a while.

Alton and I arrive half an hour before Yvette shows up. She's a waitress at an Italian restaurant a few blocks away, and I guess she didn't get off on time. So we order our coffee and wait at a table in the far corner of the cafe. I'm stirring the sugar into my second cup when I spot a young woman, twenty-three or so I guess, with luxurious straight black hair coming in through the door. Alton notices her about the same time and nudges me. "That's Yvette," he

says, and stands up to greet her.

"Hi there, Alton," she smiles and I notice a small gap between her front teeth. Alton, always the gentleman, pulls her chair out for her and introduces us. She's a slim, tanned girl with a firm handshake.

"So, Alton tells me you're a waitress. I used to wait tables when I was in college, and I hated it. How do you like it?" I pull a cigarette out of the nickel-plated case that Alton gave me last year and light it with one fluid motion. He gets up to go buy a newspaper from the machine on the sidewalk, and I watch him walk away, thinking that he must want for us to talk without him.

"Well, actually, I'm in school, too, so I hope I won't be doing it much longer. But it's not as bad as most people think. I kind of like working with people." This peculiarly appealing young thing flashes her gap-toothed smile and says, "Once I graduate, though, I'll never go back."

We occupy our time with small talk until Alton returns with his New York Times. She and I both look to him as he sits, and I can see from the corner of my eye that the expression on her face is much like mine--one that admires with a sense of knowledge about the object of my admiration.

"Yvette is an English major, Cynthia. Isn't that a coincidence?"

"Really," I say, with a new realization of more that we have in common. "Has Alton told you that I'm an English professor? But I'm taking a few semesters off right now. What do you want to do?"

"You probably think I'm making this up, but I plan on teaching, too. High school, though." I watch with thinly disguised attraction as she clicks her Zippo open to light a thin menthol cigarette. Her face has a strange masculine quality--her piercing eyes and strong, high cheekbones--that is somehow exhibited through distinctly feminine features. She exhales and says, "High school students are kind of fun, kind of carefree."

I smile coolly and lift my coffee to my lips. "Funny," I say. "That's one of the reasons I chose to teach at the college level. College students are more open-minded and willing to try new things. Well, a perfect example is the fact that we both have the same lover. I think high school aged people are too caught up in possessiveness to even consider sharing boyfriends. What do you think?"

"You're right on that," Yvette laughs. "Three years ago I would never have thought that I would do something so far out," and I laugh with her.

"I just realized how strange this must seem to someone who's not involved. Everybody would think we're crazy if they knew!"

"Well, ladies," Alton interrupts. "I hate to spoil the party, but I just remembered I have some work to do on one of my cases." He stands up and puts on his coat. "I forgot all about it until now." He looks at me with a smile, and then at Yvette with the same smile.

"But Yvette just got here," I protest, gesturing toward her.

"Oh, that's okay," she coos. "We don't need him just to have a conversation, do we?" She smiles up at Alton and says, "Sorry you can't stay, but you're not spoiling our party."

Alton kisses my lips, kisses Yvette's hand, and is gone, just like that. I look over at Yvette suspiciously, and try to decide if I want to order another cup of coffee. "I definitely wasn't expecting this," I say flatly.

"I know."

"How 'bout this, why don't we at least go to a bar or something so I can have a Bloody Mary?" I say, crunching out my cigarette. "I could use one of those more than this coffee," I laugh.

We stand to put our coats on, and I toss fifteen bucks on the table. Luckily, there's a good Irish bar just a few blocks away, so we won't have to walk too far.

After about three Bloody Marys, I turn to look Yvette in the eye and I tell her I think she's gorgeous. "Why would you want to hang out with an old lady, anyway?" I joke.

"You're not an old lady, and you know it." She grins at me and I can't help but smile back. I never thought that a younger woman would be so appealing to me. She lights another of her cigarettes and winks at me. Stepping down off her barstool, Yvette whispers in my ear, "Let's go to my apartment. I'll give you a back rub." I can feel her warm breath on my neck and nod to her. I never would have expected that this would happen today when I woke up this morning.

As we enter her cozy, green-carpeted apartment, I can instantly identify with the coconut incense that has obviously been burned here. It reminds me of my college days, when we used to

burn incense to cover the smell of pot in the dorms. Yvette turns the track lighting down to just a glimmer, and taking off her jacket, turns to me. "Well, this is it," she says, holding her arms out wide in a gesture akin to the ladies on The Price is Right. The dim light gives her smooth arms a nice glow and her lips just the slightest shine. I can feel my stomach getting all squishy and my chest seems hollow with the echo of my pounding heart. Actually I feel much like I did the first time Alton and I undressed in front of each other. I'm nervous about being naked, free from all disguise, but I can't stand to have these clothes oppressing me any longer.

I approach Yvette with deliberate movements, hoping not to embarrass myself, and stub my toe anyway, on the leg of the coffee table. My body feels almost like a vacant cavity, like some kind of hollow shell waiting to be filled with something. I can smell her sweet vanilla perfume and kiss her on her soft cheek. We press our noses together and I can feel her eyelashes brush mine when we blink. Her dark hair, straight and thick, fills my left hand, and as I touch her eyelids she wraps her arms around me and we fall, giggling like schoolgirls, into the couch. Her lips are fresh and full, and they feel so smooth when I kiss them. Her hand glides up the outside of my thigh and continues along my hip, under my loose dress all the way to my breasts. Her cold fingers feel surprisingly wonderful on my skin. We begin peeling each other's clothes off seductively until we both are facing each other, exposed and unprotected, on the couch. I squeeze her close to me, embracing the unfamiliar but fabulous feeling of her breasts on my stomach, thinking that this must be how it felt for Alton.

I wake to the song of the church's bells calling its parishioners inside. I sit up and blink, adjusting my eyes to the late morning sun beaming through the window. Yvette's bed is vast and white, smothered by a thick down comforter. Her hair is in sharp contrast to the white of the linens, and it's spread out like wings over her pillow. I'm sitting here thinking about last night. Everything was so perfect, it almost seems silly that I've been nervous for so long. Yvette is wonderful, beautiful, and I can't wait to tell everything to Alton, to share every detail about her skin, her voice, her smile. But then again, he already knows.

Feet
Mary Ann Donnelly

Aging
Sharon Robinson

Matisse's Dance

As night falls we dance, my sisters and I;
gone is the sun, dark is the sky.
We skip in the nude like Bacchantes in bands;
a circle of bodies, a joining of hands.

On green hills we dance, my sisters and me;
we are together, our spirits our free.
The circle of life, a communion of mothers;
two have let go to make room for others.

As night falls we dance, my sisters and I;
gone is the sun, dark is the sky.
As we twirl on the hills by the shores of dark waters,
Watch over us, Goddess, for we are your daughters.

Linda Marie Duncan

Moon-Watching At Tybee Pier

Water in
Velvety warmth

Sad faced souls
        Hovering along
The waves
And there above
February full moon drags down
Silvery hair as those of seaweed
Over his mid-aged shoulders

Heavy with a 30-year mortgage
Two cars third-grade son with wife
A lot more . . .
Pressures
From profession colleagues money
Hell! . . . Just life itself!

Scatters all over like
Day-old dandruff.

"Look! The reflection of the moon . . ."
"UmUm . . ."
"Isn't it like a . . ."
". . . shit-covered gold coin, maybe . . . uh?"

Sad faced souls nowhere to go
Wave back and forth back and forth . . .
While February full moon drags
His old feet as those of the Old-man in sea

His book-smelled fingers
Comb through my black hair
Again!

Kyonghee Ingraham

Darkling I Listen
Mary O'Sako

When Thomas sat up in bed it was still dark and he could not yet see where he was. The sound that had pulled him from sleep had been like a hammer hitting soft, internal things; living things. An undercurrent of a sound it was, like a mallet crushing an ant mound--*game over guys*. He had returned from time behind the fluttering eyelids of r.e.m. thinking the sound had soared to become the rusty drone of a large insect in irregular flight, alighting solely to feed upon him; a bit here, a bit there. It had transcended the dream he was having. *Another one,* Thomas thought, rubbing with both hands at his face to cleanse himself of the bitter dream gall that still clung to him.

In the dream he had been pulling his brother Pete who'd been twelve again; pulling him along in the rusted out wagon they'd shared years ago as kids, pulling him through a black world with no end. They'd been there before. He remembered that woman with the sea-green eyes. He'd seen her only three dreams ago, her deep laughter beckoning to him, her long legs swinging like ivory pendulums from her lofty seat. *She* was ahead, always just up ahead. Thomas had climbed towards the sound of her throaty voice, his breathing increasing rapidly with their journey. And there'd been Petey to consider. When he'd glanced back to see that Treva also sat in the wagon behind Pete with her meaty arms wrapped tightly about his shoulders, and that she was still in her nightgown, his heart had really taken off.

Treva's presence in the dreams always signaled the coming of *IT*. *IT* had come for them this night as well, making its arrival known from somewhere behind with steps large enough to shake the ground beneath them and breath strong enough and cold enough to turn his sweat to ice. Thomas refused to look back, knowing that just the mere sight of *it* would cause his racing heart to stop. He began to run, pumping his legs like pistons, ignoring the pain that shot down the arm that was cemented fast to the handle of the wagon and *it*s weighty cargo.

Thomas had run as fast as he could but it had still gained on them, its loud gasping breaths becoming a *drone*. At the last moment, the green-eyed woman's laughter disappeared and his hand

had been allowed to slip from the wagon. There was no sound from Petey and Treva at all. Thomas chanced a look back; the wagon was gone, the thing had been fed. He was alone in the great darkness. He had awakened at that moment with a start, clutching his chest.

Thomas massaged his shoulder and looked over at Treva while he waited for his fluttering heart to subside. The leisurely rise and fall of her chest was the only sign of animation about her. Thomas' heart skipped a beat, something glittered wickedly from the top of her chest, some great eye...*Stop it! Things will get away from you if you let them. Stop and open your eyes, old man. Wake up.* Thomas looked closer, it was only a ring. Something gold and new, winking steadily upon her finger in the half-light of morning. He shook his head and brushed at the back of his neck with his hand and tried to stand up but something held on tightly to his feet. *It?* No. *It* had only been the air-conditioner. He could hear the loud, uneven, hum of the compressor that crouched just outside of their bedroom window.

The goddamn air-conditioner kicked on again. He shoved impatiently at his blankets, they were bunched and twisted around his legs like entrails. Finally he pulled free and stepped away.

"Who's calling?" Treva Johnson mumbled suddenly from where she lay spread-eagled atop the damp covers. Thomas gasped as her voice cut through the quiet roar of the morning.

"What? No one. No one is calling. It's that air conditioner kicked on again. I had it set to eighty-five and already it comes on. Open the windows, turn on the fans, and it comes on anyway and it isn't even daylight yet."

"Oh," she rolled over and threw an arm over her face. Her flesh looked gray in the dimness.

"Go back to sleep. I'll see to it."

"I can't sleep. I was dreaming about the phone. I still think I hear it ringing. Maybe it really was. Who could tell with all the racket?"

"Who would call at this hour?" Thomas stopped, still panting, and looked at her.

"I don't know. Maybe Pete. Who knows. You all right?"

Thomas shrugged and left, thinking sometimes it was better not to speak. Things could drag on painfully if he spoke. He turned on the hall light, squinted at the thermostat and grumbled quietly, "It's only seventy-eight degrees," then flipped the lever to ninety and

the air-conditioner stopped.

"God damn it all anyway," Thomas spat, wiping the back of his neck as he headed for the bathroom. He sighed when his feet left carpet to hit the deliciously cool tile there. Sitting on the toilet for a long time with his head in his hands, Thomas thought about how he might get up the guff to call Petey that afternoon, see how he was doing. The thought of calling Pete made him sigh again.

Thomas listened to the sound of things rising outside with the dawn. Birds, dogs, cars, lawn sprinkler systems. The endless cycle. Thomas thought he could make out the green-eyed woman's laughter somewhere beyond it all. It made the hair on his back rise all the way to his buttocks, and caused a long dead something to stir within his groin. *My darling, my darkling,* he thought with a chuckle. When his alarm went off he sprinted on tip-toes to turn it off before it disturbed Treva. She still lay with one arm thrown over her face and the other stretched out toward his empty side of the bed.

Thomas glanced down at her while he stood catching his breath, this wife of twenty-five years. The scent of her expensive night cream tainted his nostrils. It was something lilac, something too sweet and oily that was supposed to decrease the aging process. His stomach rolled slightly. Treva's nightshirt had ridden up to her waist and he could see the dark shadow of hair that began at the top of her thighs where it intersected with the thick area that was her pubic bone; thick and empty, with no children to show for their efforts. So still she lay; as still as death. Thomas shuddered and knelt by the foot of the bed, feeling about for his slippers until he heard her cough; then he hurried to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee.

By the time Treva came to the kitchen to start breakfast Thomas had already finished his first cup of coffee out on the patio. He sat on one of the metal wrought iron chairs that Treva had purchased just last week. It was hard but cool beneath him. Thomas eased his weight back into the chair and crossed his legs, blotting out the sight of the rising day with thoughts of the green-eyed woman and how very soft and long her thighs had looked. He wondered vaguely if she was someone he knew, or someone he had known. The second cup of coffee grew cold in his hands. When Treva began to bang pots and pans around inside the darkness of the screen door, he took a last sip of the coffee and winced. It had already begun to work its acid upon his fifty year old esophagus and sent darts of pain

shooting from behind his breastbone. Thomas leaned forward and coughed.

The sun was moving too swiftly, it had already reached the flower garden beside the patio. The reflection of pure light on the border of color there seemed as if it had been created by an artist's unseen brush only moments before. The rawness of birth. It made Thomas blink. He looked away and wished he'd brought his sunglasses from the house.

"I'm going to turn the *thing* on soon, Thomas! It's going to hit ninety by noon!" called Treva in a high, sing-song voice. It was Monday. Monday was shopping day for Treva and her good pal Catherine. Thomas cleared his throat and frowned. The sun had placed a strip of lighter gray on the concrete between him and the flowers, it began to inch towards his feet. Thomas shoved his chair farther into the shade of the house. He stared at the ground and concentrated on nothing. *Sometimes things seemed less complicated if you didn't think* at *all. Sometimes people think too much, Thomas thought, sometimes that was a problem in itself.*

"Turn it to eighty, then. Let it kick on at eighty," Thomas finally replied after a short while. He went inside after Treva closed the windows and turned on their twelve year old air-conditioner, an air conditioner that he'd put off replacing for too long. Thomas let the screen door slam shut behind him.

"Bob used to work in electronics." Treva was saying. " He told me a good air-conditioner should last twenty years, but I wonder if it will make it another year." She placed a fruit salad in front of him and stepped out onto the patio. It had a fringe of parsley around the edges and a gooey cherry on top. Thomas pushed it around on his plate and watched Treva until she'd disappeared to the shed out back. He hurried down the hall and turned the thermostat off, the compressor rattled to a stop outside.

"Bob who?" Thomas called out breathlessly when Treva had settled down in front of the strip of garden that was now covered in sunlight.

"Yeah, you know. Bob Martin from next door. His wife works at the bank? He used to work with air conditioners."

"Oh. Right. Well, I thought it would make it another summer too, even though it sounds rough. You can never tell about those damn things."

Treva said nothing. She knelt, leaning forward on the

concrete, her hands busy with the patch of garden. Thomas picked at his fruit salad and watched the loose flesh on her upper arms ripple softly while she worked.

"Everyone thinks your pushing it after twelve years!" he yelled out to her. "Everyone thinks that," he commented. *God, what I wouldn't give for just five years ago. Everything seemed so predictable then. Predictable can be good. Give me predictable anyday.*

"Yeah, well, don't talk to anyone until we talk to Bob first. Okay?" She churned at the soft ground relentlessly, her shiny trowel glancing in and out of the sunlight. Several twine-bound rose bushes were piled into the wheelbarrow beside her, their thorny branches grasping helplessly for freedom. "Oh, and I'm going with Catherine this afternoon. It's Monday, our *uptown* day. I'll be back to start dinner before you even leave work."

"You, wait on a new air conditioner?" Thomas laughed, his mouth full. It sounded like a cough. Treva ignored him.

Suddenly nauseous, Thomas spit out the mouthful of pineapple he'd been chewing on for the last several minutes. He pushed away his fruit salad, took another sip of coffee and readdressed Treva's back.

"Why don't you leave the zinnias? Roses are hard to care for. Expensive upkeep too," Thomas called out. He began to rewrap the salad in plastic to save for later then dumped it into the garbage disposal instead, plastic and all.

"I'm weeding *and* putting in the roses. The roses will last, they are classics. Don't worry about them, okay? Catherine *loves* them, has them planted all over the place. Says they aren't such a hassle. And you know how big *her* place is. Besides, I like the color. Don't you?"

Thomas didn't answer. He pretended not to hear as he ran the water into the sink, marveling silently over how easily the plastic had slipped through the porcelain. He thought of how his brother Pete used to like to garden. Petey could grow anything: roses, corn, tomatoes. They'd taken him crates of seeds over the years, he and Treva, driving over the backboard roads to Pete's little house with supplies for yet another of his brother's *drought periods*. Soap, milk, flour, cereal. Thomas had packed what he considered all of the basics. Treva would throw in some Danish and an expensive box of

chocolates. *He's probably starved for a little something nice*, she'd say.

Gardening. He hated it himself, hated getting the dirt under his nails where it stuck like black glue. It took forever to cleanse yourself of garden dirt. *Give me a lawn mower or weed whip just once a week, hell once a month and I'm happy,* thought Thomas. *A little distance between the hand and the soil was always better.*

"I guess I'm going to have to call Pete today. See if he needs anything."

"You think he's empty?" Treva called back loudly.

"Of course. Man's been out of work for seven years now," said Thomas, wishing he'd kept quiet. He wiped his hands on Treva's "just for show" rose patterned dish towel with the lace on the edges.

"What about our plans to go out *together* this *weekend?"*

"What? We'll see." Thomas squinted out at her. The sun was hitting that straw hat she liked to wear, the one with the silk sunflowers on the brim that left large shadows around the loose skin of her eyes. Thomas didn't like looking at her when she wore that hat. He belched softly and waited for the pressure to subside.

"I'm just talking."

Treva went back to her digging. Thomas shrugged and watched her profile, her slow deliberate movements.

"I've got to get these roses in," she said breathlessly, blinking hard, her lashes striking like miniscule snakes at her cheek bones with the passage of each word. He leaned out the door and tossed the last of his coffee out into the grass. Treva sat back on her heels and looked up at him with her steel grey eyes; she pointed with one soiled glove at her Gucci gardening watch. It was time for him to get ready for work.

Work. Thomas sighed at the thought. He maneuvered *old reliable* into his space within the cavernous parking garage and shut off the engine. The old blue sedan idled on for another moment, not realizing it had been shut off, before it finally died. Thomas thought about how Treva would respond to a suggestion about a new car over dinner this evening. Then he shook his head. *Sometimes things were better left alone, sometimes things were better when he said nothing at all.* Thomas patted the hot fender and entered his building.

Alone, Thomas was blessedly, sinfully, alone in the midst of the morning bustle. It had been only forty-five minutes since he'd last

spoken to Treva, forcing a quick kiss upon her warm, salty mouth as she'd leaned into him out on the front porch then calling out a hurried " good-bye" from over his shoulder. She was already as distant in his mind as the toll booth he always had to drive through on his way to and from work, shoveling in endless amounts of hard cash in exchange for this, for these few hours of being alone.

Thomas thought briefly about working over until seven this evening and began to whistle. He stepped through the glass tunnel that led from the parking garage to the main building that was actually a giant sheet of beige glass and stone that seemed impermeable to anything. A fortress. The air inside was consistently cool, noiselessly so.

Like the past few mornings, Thomas felt the growing heat of the June day still glistening upon his skin, he loosened his tie slightly with a tug of his index finger and smiled at Ingrid. Ingrid was the receptionist who'd been sitting there at her round desk in the heart of this building every day for fifteen years, the shade of red upon her generous lips never varying or fading. *Give me predictable any day,* Thomas hummed in his mind. Ingrid smiled back at him. And like every morning, he jiggled his keys in his pocket and let his feet talk in a whisper as he walked wordlessly past.

In the elevator he began to hum aloud. It was Monday, Monday, Monday. Thomas leaned heavily against the shiny metal sides while he stood with several other passengers within the space that glided effortlessly upward. *Destination heaven?* Thomas grinned when the fifteenth floor rang out and opened before him.

Thomas' own office was dark and cool. He had chosen the colors himself way back when he'd first earned the space. A deep forest green carpet stretched out like a magic rug beneath the modest oak desk and burgundy upholstered chairs; all built to last. His feet moved soundlessly as he laid his briefcase neatly on his desk then moved over to the window. The heavy drapes were also of a dark green that shielded him from the hard light of day. Thomas sighed and placed a tiny crack in the drapes, then removed his jacket which he hung neatly in the tiny closet beside his desk. He thought briefly about the air conditioner crouched in the back of his own home and wondered if Treva had reset it after he'd left. Thomas flipped through his desk calendar and jotted *a.c.* one week from today. That would do it. He would move on *this* without Treva's consent. He chuckled aloud.

Shaking his head, Thomas glanced over the neatly typed itinerary that he'd left on his desk top calendar Friday afternoon. There were an even number of clients to see today. *A good omen. Even numbers were always good. Give me even any day.* The amount of paper work that passed through his hands was also palatable and the phone rang conservatively as the morning melted away. At twelve noon, Thomas sat back in his chair and stretched, feeling the tightness take up a notch in his chest at the thought of lunch.

The phone line lit up. Thomas reached for it quickly, his face darkening. It was only Ingrid.

"It's your brother, Pete, Mr. Johnson," she announced. "He wants to know if you will have lunch with him today."

Thomas felt a light glaze of sweat begin to cover him like the icy sweat from his nightmares. Had *IT* returned to his land of consciousness to torture him with its breath of ice then feed upon his flesh? *No, no, things were better if you didn't think too much. Things were better if you could work them away.*

"No. I have too much to do. Tell him to call the house later."

"Yes, sir."

Ingrid was gone, taking Petey's presence with her. Thomas picked up the rolodex with its bulk of information. He would deal with Petey later, after he'd had a chance to deal with things about that air conditioner.

Don't call now, wait till you talk to him on Sunday, Treva had said. Sometimes she could sound convincing if he let her in, sometimes things *seemed* so convincing that way. *Convincing.* Thomas flipped through the rolodex and a slightly worn page with a business card taped to it caught his attention.

"Rogers Heating and Air," it said in bold red letters. Thomas smiled and pressed the numbers into the phone.

"Rogers Heating and Air," a deep, feminine voice answered.

"Yes, yes, I would like to speak to someone about purchasing a compressor for my air conditioning unit?"

"Certainly. I can help you," the voice answered. "My name is Rachel Forest."

Velvet, her voice was pure velvet. And her thighs would be like ivory pendulums, swinging softly in the night. Thomas' heart began to beat a little harder. Be you my darling, my darkling?

"Yes, Rachel, I'm Thomas. Tom. Tom Johnson. I would like to order a unit that I saw in a catalog. A TX100 Crane. You know the type?"

"I'm with you. We happen to carry that exact machine, I can check available stock for you. What size?"

"Two and a half ton."

"That's a standard size. For home?"

"Yes."

"Well, let's see, yes, yes. Computer says we have two in our warehouse. We can have it ready to install, let's see, by Friday?"

"Friday? That quick?" Thomas glanced at his desk calendar. *Dinner with Catherine* was inked in at seven that Friday evening. "Friday would be perfect. That will be wonderful."

"Okay, Tom," she laughed softly, a deep, throaty laugh. Thomas sucked in his next breath.

"Will that be cash or credit?" she continued.

"You accept Visa?"

"We certainly do."

"Yes, Ma'am," he answered cheerfully while he fumbled in his pocket. "Here we go." He removed his card from his well-worn wallet and recited the numbers slowly to her. There was a short pause while he waited for Rachel and her delicious voice to return to him.

"Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, here."

"Could you read that number once more?"

"Certainly." Thomas recited the numbers carefully, placing the tip of his pencil over each one as he passed over it.

"Mr. Johnson, the transaction has been rejected. Could it be a new account?"

"Rejected? No, it's not new. I mean, the card is new," he stuttered, flashing the smooth unworn surface of the card in the light. "But I have had the account for awhile, I just don't use it."

"Is it a joint account?"

"Yes, but I don't think my wife has used it either. There must be a mistake. Try it again would you?"

There was a silence, then, "I'm sorry, perhaps you would like to try another method?"

Thomas flipped open his wallet and dug out his Mastercard. "Try this, maybe they closed the other since I haven't used it in so

long," he said then recited another long stream of numbers. His throat felt too tight, too hot. He tugged off his tie with one hand.

"Mr. Johnson, I don't know what's going on with these machines," the voice replied, sounding soft and sympathetic. "Perhaps you'd like to try something else, or maybe try again later? We are here till eight."

"That's all right, I better try later," Thomas said lightly, fighting the urge to cough. He hung up the phone then sat staring at the cards on the face of his desk. They lay perfectly shaped twins; side by side, shiny, square, nothing. In his arm he felt the heavy ache return from his long journey with the wagon. Thomas reached for the phone again and punched in the number on the back of the Visa card. A robotic message answered, directing him as to which buttons to press for what information. Thomas followed instructions to the detail. He thought it must be like following the instructions on how to get to hell, then held his lips tightly against a giggle while the recording played out its tuneless message.

Goddamn it all, he thought, unbuttoning his top two shirt buttons. Thomas pulled his shirt-tail free from the back of his pants and shook out his shoulders.

He picked up the Mastercard and dialed its number. He listened closely, following the instructions carefully, ignoring the call-waiting beep on his monitor. *It's probably Pete again, or Treva; wanting something, always something. They would just have to wait. They could all wait. Things might be more clear to me if they would just wait.* When the message played itself out he sat with the phone cemented to his hand until an operator picked up the line.

"Cancel it!" he finally shouted after a short inquiry confirmed what he already knew. He slammed the phone into its cradle and ran his fingers through his damp hair.

Twenty thousand dollars! How could anyone spend Twenty thousand dollars? On what? Gritting his teeth, he cut up the cards into tiny pieces and let them fall like jagged rain onto the quiet green of his carpet. Thomas thought of Treva laughing at lunch with Catherine, the both of them sitting comfortably beneath the shade of her big, empty, sunflower hat. He thought about the air conditioner running and running. *It could run until it burst. Set it at anything she wants. Sometimes things were better left alone, sometimes things didn't drag out so long when they are left alone!* His chest squeezed hard enough to take his breath from him, he stood and staggered to

the window, pulling the drapes wide, acutely aware of the renewed weightiness within his left arm. *Let go of the fucking wagon. Hah!* He leaned his forehead against the glass and closed his eyes. When the pain in his chest eased up, he left the office in a hurry, ignoring Ingrid's stares as he passed by her desk.

"Take a break, Ingrid," he called out to her. "Take a fucking break, for God's sake!"

Out on the street, he waited until the mallet struck again, crushing his chest painfully before he began to run blindly into the sunlight. He ran as fast as he could, heading uphill until he was once again alone in the dark.

Humblebee

Zig
zagging,
meandering above
beds bright
he goes up
and
down,
turns left,
then right
quite quickly--yet quicker before he slows
spotting a succulent bull's-eyes below,
a giant, gold sun, her arms open wide
calling him with a wink of her soft, black eye
to come enjoy a drink, on her, nectar sweet
a gift for spreading her joy, miles or feet . . .

and next, into hands of those pink and white,
their pastel palms flat to the sun in spite
of the late month and the mercury's height,
open for business--a sugary invite
to stop, to sample, this candied delight

and back up above
blossoming rows
a spiral,
a corkscrew--
down
again
he
goes.

Jennifer Rurka

Sunflowers
Holly Leigh Irick

All In a Wave's Work

Foaming and frothing, she's seeping sea slobber, lap
after lap against sand smothered shores, and she blues
up the maps and fills in the edges around continents
swimming through the universe while deep down inside her scat-
ter fish cults and critters, crustaceans, that creep, cuttled and
nautiled, through her tangle of kelp and coralish hair, and the sea
lilies, sea cucumbers, sea bass, saw/swordfish, white mottled whales
spraying and spawning within her salty womb, and all the while up
above her, schizophrenic skies spew torrents of rain,
whipping up westerlies, as she swallows up icebergs that break
in the arctic, drinking up biled rivers, so she endures all
this mayhem as beach breath beats her until she becomes bedlam,
and then come the seasons where, for awhile, she'll be rocking
and wafting grey gulls in her uncapped embrace on her unfurrowed
visage unpocked by the hail, while the earth's land masses barely adrift
On her easy heaving
Breast of green . . .

Donna M. Ferrence

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The Lillian Spenser Award winners and the Art Award winner were chosen this year by the *Calliope* staff.

A Note From the Editors

Many of you know that *Calliope* has fought hard this year to maintain its existance. Both the staff and the editors of this year's edition have worked to produce a quality journal that truly reflects the student body's diversity and creativity. Since *Calliope* is a student publication, the selection of work was done by the *Calliope* staff, which is composed only of students. In addition, the Lillian Spencer Awards for poetry and prose and the Art Award were chosen by the staff this year. As with any professional publication, some editing was necessary; however, the *Calliope* staff strove to maintain the overall integrity of each indivdual work. The staff would like to extend a special thanks to the Writing Center staff (who will probably never want to hear the name *Calliope* again), the magnificent Dr. Marinara who held our hands and kissed our boo boos, and to our friends and families who, although they are still puzzled as to why we volunteered for this to begin with, are still our friends and family. Above all, we would like to thank you, the students, for providing us with the opportunity to publish the exceptionally creative work that made this edition possible. It is our sincere hope that this edition represents a rebirth of *Calliope* that will continue on for many years to come.

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** *Denotes Award*

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Simplicity
Hope Hassel

silver revolution: southern gothic

Melissa S. Hill

beautiful
i think
to stare at crimson
and imagine black
as the absence of
color and the scream
of velvet to be
the king's ransom
and lost i think
to stare at mirrors
and take the silver
and crack my revolution
to time-spinning
details of half
remembered nights
in the full moon's
blood.
is found a color?
is lost a taste?
is beautiful alive?
these things
these questions
grow inside and i give
birth to the beast
in the light
and the angel in the
dark.

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J. C. Penney Elevator
Michelle Shulte

Insomnia

Rekha Prakash

the moon continues
to rise while I prepare
my bed of blooms
uncovering protective sheets
tossing and turning
the soil in my hands
dropping seeds tainted
scarlet, like my eyes
that water
from the cool night air
while the poppies
slouch and the breeze
allows their
heads
only to nod
but never rest.

Ashton

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A Whisper on an Owl's Wings

Anita Maurer

A whisper as soft as wind could be heard: "Where are you David?" It was getting late and boredom was setting in. Gina sat alone in her upstairs bedroom, just down the hall from her parents' room. "I wonder if he's coming," she thought. It was raining rather hard, and she figured it was the weather keeping him. She glanced at the diamond engagement ring on her finger, a symbol of David's love for her. Tiny flecks of blue, red, green, and yellow glistened from the gem; it mesmerized her. The roars from the thunder were lulling her to sleep although she tried desperately to stay awake and wait for David.

At last she heard a faint voice from below. "Hey, Gina, are you up there? Hey, Gina, open your window."

Undoing the window latch as silently as she could, she gently opened the window, placing a segment of a broomstick beneath it to keep it open. She always feared it would snap in half at the weight of the window, locking her out of the house. Gina climbed to the ground using the trellis. The rain chilled her to the bone, and she could smell the wet mud in the air. "Where have you been?" she asked.

David smiled and held out a rose. "Getting you this," he said. His hair was wet and drops of water accumulated at the ends of his eyelashes. David's sharp features, dark hair and high cheekbones were from his Indian heritage, but his eyes were of the deepest, darkest blue. It was his eyes that captured Gina the most.

Gina took the rose and David kissed her on the cheek. "David, when should we tell my parents we're getting married?"

"Well, maybe we should get married and then tell your parents," he said.

"But David I..."

"Then you and I can live on the land I have in Nebraska and I can take care of you."

"David I think we should..."

"You don't even have to work; you could just stay home and take care of things."

"But I don't want to move to Nebraska."

Suddenly a light appeared in the kitchen window. "My dad is up," she said. "I have to get back in." She kissed him goodnight, and David helped her back up the trellis into her room.

With the smell of his cologne still fresh on her skin, Gina tried to fall

asleep that night, but her whirling imagination kept her awake. Could she honestly bring herself to quit school to move away with David? What about her parents? What if she wasn't happy living in Nebraska? A month into her eighteenth year and she felt like the world was on her shoulders, and her stomach twisted because of it.

Gina propped her head on the pillow while the moon cast dozens of small shadows onto the ceiling. She glared at them, remembering Larea's Christmas party where she met her one true love. "That's David," Larea said, trying not to make it obvious she was pointing him out. Gina was stunned at the brightness of his eyes. She thought him to be arrogant at first and didn't want to speak with him. It wasn't until he insisted on walking her home that she became enchanted with him. That night she promised herself she would always have David by her side...always, no matter what.

"We'll find a way to work this out," she thought. She felt the tingling of her body relaxing. Slowly she drifted further and further into sleep.

The air was thick and moist when Gina got up for school the next morning. With an emptiness in her stomach, she stared out the window wondering what the day had in store for her. She glanced at the clock. Seven thirty. "Damn, I'm going to be late." She grabbed her coat and purse and jumped into the car. The roads were slick and wet, and it would take her even longer to get to school today. "This is strange," she thought. "Only a few cars on the road." She turned on the radio and learned the storm from the night before caused several leaks in the roof of her high school, and classes were canceled for the day. The conversation she had with David the previous night loomed in her mind, and she took the long way home so she could think about her problems.

Suddenly an object appeared in the road and Gina came within inches of hitting the creature. Looking into her rearview mirror she couldn't make out what it was, so she put the car in reverse and got out to take a closer look. "Oh my God!" Gina found herself staring into the biggest blackest eyes she had ever seen. "A Grey horned owl!" Someone had hit the animal with a vehicle the night before and left it to wallow in agony. It was still alive and obviously in pain. Her heart sank when its sad eyes pleaded for help. She scooped him up in her jacket and raced to the animal hospital.

Once at the hospital, the owl let her pet its beak, which moved Gina's spirit; she knew she was doing something special. "Well, Gina, it looks as though his wing has been dislocated," said Dr. Allen. She could tell that much on her own because his wing was protruding outward from the side.

"Can you do anything doctor?" she asked.

"I don't know. His wing is so badly damaged that to put it in a sling, I have to temporarily put him to sleep. It is possible that the anesthesia may kill him." She knew putting the owl to sleep would probably be best, but she had formed a relationship with it.

"Do whatever you can doctor, and I'll hope for the best," she said.

For several days Gina fed and cared for the owl. She was the only human he would take food from and the only human he would come to. Her only sadness was she knew sooner or later his wing would heal, and he would leave her to fly back to the wild. Suddenly she thought of something, "Maybe I can train him. Then I can keep him for a pet." This idea excited her and she called Dr. Allen to see what he thought.

"That's a nice idea," said Dr. Allen. "The only problem, Gina, is that he's a wild owl, and it's going to be very difficult to tame him, much less train him. The only advice I can give you is that it never hurts to try. If it doesn't work, you will have to return him to the wild." Gina thought about the happiness the owl had brought her, and she rushed to the library to check out several books on wild birds. She read diligently, not omitting any pages. One night David stopped by while she was sitting on the porch doing research on her owl.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"Well," she said. "I'm going to try to train Mr. Owl, so I'm reading up on wild birds."

"Mr. Owl," said David sarcastically. "You named that dirty old bird Mr. Owl. Gina, that's a bit immature, don't you think? Besides, you'll never train a wild bird; you're wasting your time trying."

"If I train him," she said, "I can keep him and just clip his wings; then he can't fly away."

It was evident by her face that what he said hurt her feelings. "It's not a stupid idea David," she said. "In fact Dr. Allen even said it was a good idea. I'm not going to clip his wings and I'm still going to try no matter what you think." Gina got up and went into the house. "Call tomorrow when you don't feel like insulting me," she said and slammed the door.

David yelled at the front door, "Why are you being so sensitive, Gina?" He stood there for a minute waiting for a reply, but none came. Finally he turned and left, feeling sorry for what he had said.

For several weeks, Gina continued her mission to train Mr. Owl. The first week she taught him to waddle over to her when she called him. His wing had not quite healed all the way, and flying was out of the question. Gina's dad built a cage for the owl, which is where he slept until the day came when his wing was finally healed. Gina was reluctant to bring him outside with her without the use of a harness, but she knew it had to be done. David was with her when she took one more look into Mr. Owl's big

black eyes before she set him free in the yard. At first the owl just looked at her, confused as to why he was no longer trapped by the harness. Then he spread his wings and took flight. David heard Gina gasp at the length of Mr. Owl's beautiful wing span. Then he saw the sadness cross Gina's face.

"Call him to see if he'll come back," he said. Gina yelled for the owl once, twice, then three times, but there was nothing. Finally, a black speck could be seen against the clouds and Gina knew it was her owl.

"There it is!" she exclaimed. "He's coming back! He understands me!"

"Wow, you really did train him Gina. That's amazing!" Mr. Owl nestled softly onto her arm, and Gina shrieked with excitement.

"I'm happy for you," David said.

Later Gina went to bed happier than she had been in a long time. Not too long afterward, her school held career day, and Gina chose the science category. The guest speaker was a marine biologist whom Gina was excited to meet. He explained the thrills and rewards of studying animals. Gina thought of her owl and how fun it was to train him and take care of him. That day she went home from school with a plan for her own future.

That night David came to see her. "I need to tell you something," he said. "I spoke to my uncle in Nebraska and he's going to lend us the money to get married. Once we've moved up there, he's going to set me up with a job. Before you know it, we will have saved enough for a house. I think we should get married right away."

The image of her owl flashed through her mind as she heard someone speaking in the distance. She then realized it was her own voice. "I want to stay here," she said.

"What? What about our life together Gina? What about our future?"

"Well, I think I want to move on to college."

"But I told you, I don't want you working. I want you to take care of things at home. Don't you understand?"

David's words cut her. "Stay and take care of things at home," she thought. Other thoughts appeared in her mind. "But I don't want to stay at home. I want to go to school and have my own career." Suddenly she remembered something. "If you want to keep him, just clip his his wing; then he can't fly away."

With that last thought Gina blurted out, "I want to live here David."

"No Gina. If we're getting married, we're doing it now. You will live with me, and there will be no more talk of you starting your own career!"

She paused for a moment and stared into his cold blue eyes. "I'll meet you at your house in twenty minutes and then we'll go." She went inside and pulled the suitcase out from under her bed. While arranging her clothes inside it, she suddenly stopped and looked at the owl sleeping in his cage. Then she looked at the clock. "Ten minutes," she said. She took her night

gown out of her dresser, gently unfolded it, and put it on. She looked at the clock. "Five minutes," she said. Slowly she climbed into bed and turned off the lamp. She looked at the owl sleeping in his cage. "Goodnight, Mr. Owl," she said. A whisper as soft as wind could be heard: "Goodbye, David."

In the Lion's Den

Katy Pace Byrd

Writing a check, "Today's my anniversary," I said.
"Congratulations, girl, how many years?"
Thought and answered, "Nineteen."
"Well, nineteen years in the lion's den
    that's something."
But this nineteen can be factored
Into honeyed moons, aromatic confluences,
Passionate cross-purposes, gritty endeavors,
Grim defeats, tender victories.
This nineteen makes a secret history for two,
A gripping and warring pushme-pullyou,
Going our separate ways together.
And here we are, still making history in the lion's den,
Still roaring, still wrestling, still prideful.
Still trying to figure out who's in charge, who's
The leader of the pack. Still needing to learn
That we're all in this together,
But knowing it all the same.
Nineteen years in the lion's den
O for a hundred more.

Cat's Reply to Schrodinger

Tiffanie L. C. Rogers

They are Outside of my box
and i wonder,
oppressing dark
upon me,
What can i know of them?
Can i know
of their state
of being
From my strong dark box?
They've left me
with, but they
are in, a thing
decaying at no
certain rate.
And the question is, while
i cannot
see them,
are they?
No, as i have often thought,
they are in
an obscure state of neither;
What can i know of them
but that they
put me in
this box,
just after
scratching
my ear,
And that maybe i am better off
in here.

Candle Kaleidoscope

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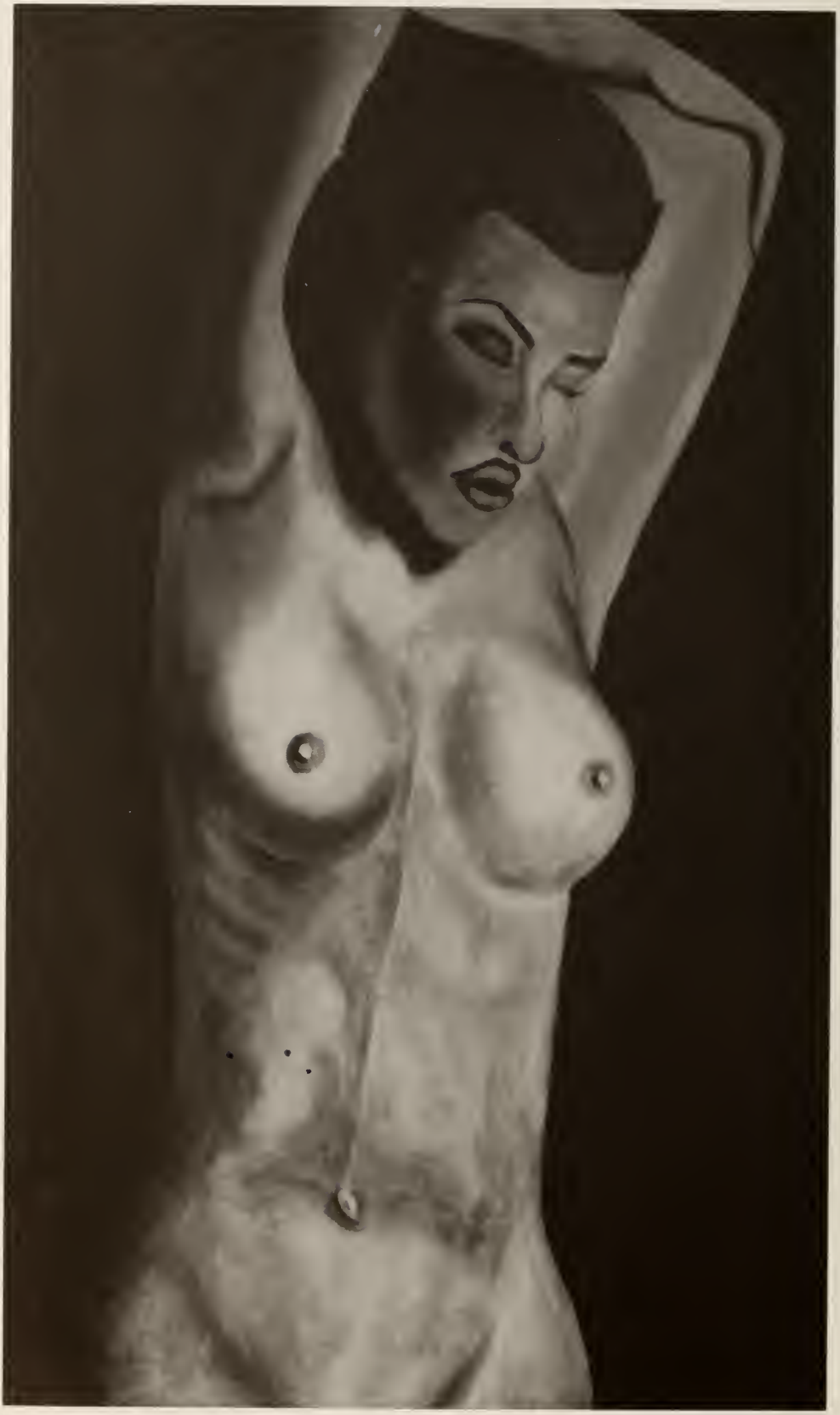
a communion

Melissa S. Hill

Softly falling into the aftermath
of a communion I anointed the
kaleidoscope of my sins.
How through the dark looking
glass I crawled through promised
lands and crystal shards pierced my
wrists though I felt a saviour
in my hands.
I bore a cross of blue-eyed
roses and a crown of gilded thorns
my temptation lingered in the
hurricane and my pain within
the storm.
I screamed in silence
took my way through empty
streets lashes fell like
burning kisses I raised my
lips for more and trembling
licked the heat.
But through the bowl
of sorrow and light and the silken
murderer's retreat, I washed my
hands of all shame denied myself
denied my maker and danced into
the naked flame.
And a stumbling hymn through
stilted lips so afraid to speak,
I gave them over to my revelation
my sermon by the tangled
tree,
and God's nails tore me bare

and laid open for all to see
the mourning existence and skillful
rage and weeping parody,
and my passion play has ended
as I give up the ghost
open my mouth for wasps and
vipers and close my tongue around
the host.



Illuminated
Novia Timbers

Bad Angel
Sara E. Goodman

With Apologies to Walt Whitman

Elaine A. Hakala

(The following is an excerpt from the poem "A Tune About Me" by world-renowned poet Whitley Yawp, wherein she describes the resources she has drawn upon while creating her many respected works)

The screeching sound of passing cars filled with teenagers, deep bass booming out the lyrics to a song about some woman's derriere and the dynamics of its movement,
The sticky quality of a glass bottle after the label is torn off,
The constant awareness that some mustards are yellow, while others are golden,
The dichotomy of Ted Koppel and his hairpiece, sweating in front of studio lights,
The cantankerous mood developing at the Dames of the American Revolution nursing home over the way cribbage scores are being altered for profit,
The little pet monkey in the clever red suit and pill box hat who had shared my bunk in my childhood and taught me so much about the meaning of life,
The tragic beauty of a lonely beer bottle lying in a corner after a party,
The still constant memory of sitting in church as a child listening to the minister say "Verily I say to you," and wondering what "Verily" meant,
The taste of pennies in my mouth,
The moment in my life I realized there was no such thing as "free space" or "free time,"
The difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist as it relates to the normal fee charged for an hour,
The lunatic hitchhiking on the side of the highway wearing red, white and blue harem pants a big "Please pick me up...I'm harmless" smile on his face,
The middle class mom in pink polyester double knit pants and matching pink curlers at Wal-Mart at 8am to buy bonbons and a magazine to prepare for a hard day's work,

The man in a thousand dollar business suit walking into a board meeting with toilet paper trailing from his shoe,
The tele-evangelist with the wind-proof hair, his accompanist with the troweled on make-up,
The bigot who arose from the murky bottom in the shallow end of the gene pool,
The heart wrenching realization that "one size" does not fit all,
The bullfighter with the high, squeaky voice,
The mental image of Albert Einstein wearing a smirk and a tee-shirt that reads "Moustache Rides,"
The dreams of white rabbits wearing orthodontic retainers on their teeth,
The realization that by definition, the term "average intelligence" means that roughly half of the people I meet fall below that,
This space for rent or lease--call 555-1545 for information,
The dreaded STD known as "mossy crack,"
The bald man with the webbed toes who hung out around the elementary school offering kippers to the children,
The nice man in Sears who showed me the proper Craftsman tool to determine if I was metric or standard,
The nightmare of waking up to discover that everyone is exactly the same, and being rapidly bored to death,
The love of mental gymnastics, and doing fifty pound benchpresses with my brain,
The meter maid in orthopedic shoes whose grin grows as she waits for the meter on my car to run out,
The number of holes in a standard sheet of institutional ceiling tile,
The cats yeowling out their lust in spring, the sound of country music singers doing the same thing year round,
The segment of the population born with a malformed duty gland,
The embodiment of masculinity on bodice-ripper novel covers, the embodiment of femininity in stick figures,
The ramifications of global warming and what that might mean to the life

expectancy of the polar bear club,
The continuing euthanasia of the art of conversation,
And these swell inside my head, till the pressure grows immense,
And the vivid streams of consciousness flow across a field of CTR green,
twisting and turning amid big glasses of sweet tea and the
occasional ice cream sandwich,
And become one with me, in a tune about me.

Hindsight

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Indian Summer

John D. Trainor

With Father Winter blowing
sarcasm in dangling icicles
on the cracking Georgia pine,
I sit with my childhood friend
reminiscing in giggles and short stares
in front of the burning ember,
an easing warmth,
rising from the cold earth

With our smiles' agreement,
my eyes meet hers,
a pair of auburn moons
that bleed into blowing autumn leaves,
returning to yesterday
at Mr. Luther's farm

When we would play hide and seek
in the woods and jump the battered fences
that once claimed ownership,
but have fallen to Mother Nature's
settling balance,
running down through the Cedar Creek cemetery,
littered with three-nailed decaying crosses,
towards the forgotten pier,
left for hidden secrets and promises
to bloom the following year
after a season of icy beating
to lose our innocent seedlings
and mature
into wildflowers

Whereas, the town folk would frown
on the two experience-blind butterflies
leaping and bumbling across tombstones
of sacred lives buried beneath
rotting symbols of exalted saviors
and martyrs,

who once watered the earth
with their bloody tears,
passing through life, claiming sanctity

While Mr. Luther always knew
that we kept shelter
behind the forbidden drapery,
he never bothered interferring
with the bubbling life that would seek refuge
in his stretching fields of poppies and pines,
but occasionally spying on its nature,
lingering where the sea and wood
would kiss by the pier
and share secrets

And on those Fall afternoons,
we would sit with our legs
dangling off the pier
tapping the water to the rhythm of the wind
blowing through her hair
and touching my face,
drawing closer to kisses
until rolling about the water
in little splashes and ripples
that drift
to infinity,
whispering, "I love you's"
in the short days
of an Indian Summer.

Eternal Winds

Don Newman

When my body has returned to that which earth and stars are made of,
And Spirit whisks me to another plane.
When this existence here is finally over,
And onward there I'm free of all this pain.
When no more shall I breathe this breath of sorrow,
Even then, I shall remember thee.

And when Eternal winds blow round about me
And all there is, is ready to start over.
These times we live will be such joyous memories,
For they were spent with you, in Heaven's love,
Which made the sadness of each day naught but a pin-prick,
As our healing came in moments fully lived.

So when our time is just a part of history,
And love well lived replaces oft felt pangs,
I'll embrace you in the Great Adventure's mystery
While our Journey brings us together once again.

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Remnants
Angie Hernden

Weather or not

Rekha Prakash

I send
down
cool
drops
that
fall
like fireballs,
hissing and spatting
with the rising steam,
each a pear-shaped bomb
plopping on men's hats
and percolating on
ladies patted powdered
noses.
The sun evaporates at my command
as I control the shapes
that shift
from
plops
to
drops,
dribbles
to
drizzles,
changing
glazed icicles
into tumbling
trickles
causing shrieks
of crash! boom!
As pedestrians
zoom
across the splashing street

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Purple Flowers
Desmal W. Purcell

Encomium On Pride

Tiffanie L.C. Rogers

Pride, oh highest of all Transgressions,
Most frequently noted in poet's lessons,
For the love of You have angels fallen,
And little men with breasts too swollen,
To the lightless levels of emptiness
Or the choiceless pit of Tartarus.
For You, men sacrifice salvation
And lament in metrical syllabication
Their Life lost to temporal joy
Like Aeneas moaning the ashes of Troy.
How great Thou are! Swift-footed Pride,
To rough a task to Thee belie;
Indiscriminate Pride, You seed throughout
Every trace of humanity's Gift of Doubt
A seed which sprouts a fruited Tree
By which we grow still closer to Thee.
Your amorphic Face superimposes
On all whose slothful conscience dozes
A will to justify Your presence,
And thence You gain their acquiescence.
Your laughter, sounding a mighty quake,
Rolls in thunder and waves' soft break
As You slaughter a lamb for sheer delight—
Never for hunger; you kill for spite.
Yet death through You is something gained
For the watchful eye of humanity, pained
To see that suffering lamb at Your side
Gives them power to resist You, oh, Pride!
Through ages and evidence, none can doubt
Your power, for it is strewn throughout
Each page of glory bled in ink,
For there 'tis seen Thine pow'r distinct.

Beloved Beowulf, son of Ectheow,
would ne'er be quite so masterful
Without You harboured in his breast
And urging him throughout his quests.

Cain's Grendle rues his triumph-day
When forced to cower to that cave
And die beneath in mother's arms
Who joined him soon within that cairn.
Mortality, though, conquers Thee
In dragon's flame whence companions flee;
Wiglaf, loyal kinsman with courage true,
Could not that fated scene undo.
Hence, the high-barrow at the shore
Where lies a legacy of Yours.
In ballads, too, Your praise is sung
As you destroy the purest Love;
Fair Barbara Allan You employed,
And with her beauty Sir John cloyed.
Though meaning well, her Pride he hurt
And she his death did fail to thwart.
A narrow road home she takes, and weary
From the wight of the knelling, eyes a'bleary,
Knowing Sir John she soon will follow
And Sleep in her own Pride-made barrow.
And shall we forget Marlowe's own Dr. Faustus,
Wherein dear Christopher tells much about us?
Gods, men, and devils; all favours are priced.
It is good that we have Your friendly advice!
You help us to focus on opportunities at hand
And forget tomorrow's violent reprimand.
Heaven awaits those who elude Your grasp;
A strength the good Doctor did not have.
See him writhe through his final hour;
His soul seeks flight, but he won't allow her
For she is betrothed unto Satan yet;
Faustus holds fast to his cowardly debt.
All that men see they think 'tis their right
To possess and destroy how'ere they might
To exaggerate temporal, mortal pleasure,
Reflecting Protagoras, that man is the measure,
And ignoring the warning that there might be
Life beyond this comparatively trite facsimile.
We see Your reflection in Francis Bacon
As he relates his essay, "On Plantations."
In him, You are manifest as Pragmatism—
Aesthetically devoid homocentralism.

Though not as harsh, Ben Johnson, too
In Penshurst sees Nature as a servant true.
Among humanity you cause great strife
By focusing man's will on his own petty life.
Alexander Pope illustrates this
In his story of a Lock and a proud young miss.
Belinda's guardian spirits well knew the price
Should the Baron succeed in his avarice.
Pope warns us at the very start
Of the throbbing Pride in Belinda's heart
As she diligently prepares-with assistance-
Her beauty, which she cultivates with persistence.
When finished applying her battle gear
And perfecting Your face without a smear,
What wonder the Baron would not be drawn
To see a victory in one lock gone!
For You guide him as well, and puff his heart;
Ah, Pride! Your grandeur is such Art!
Pope reduces Your antics to gentle folly
In this mock heroic where the victory solely
Conjures a tantrum unwarranted here
For 'twas only a hair! 'Twas not like her ear
Was severed or some mortal wound inflicted!
But unto You she is truly addicted.
Her shrieks and cries make us cringe from the page,
For we see ourselves in her clamor of rage.
Pope hopes that through his insight we
Might realize our masks are fashioned by Thee,
And not remove them, does he suggest,
But just understand their temporalness
And not think the world has suddenly ended
By some stroke of evil ne'er to be mended
When we are deprived of a lock of hair
Or some other trivial matter of care—
Unless, of course, we allow our Pride
To force us a trivial life to abide.
Pope, with playful wit and grand fantasy,
Exposes the folly of our trite vanity.
Milton would rather be far more grave
In his honorable mission to from You save
Our souls through granting us recognition,
Which we can then use as ammunition.

(Milton look down and lend me you reason,
So i'll well represent your account of High Treason);
You whispered rebellion in Satan's ear
And caused him Heaven's peace to smear
With jealous rage and false righteousness.
But Who told You to whisper thus?
The Manichean would not understand
Your place as a Gift of God's great Hand!
But Milton knows that Goodness is earned;
Not granted or imposed— 'tis yearned
For by humanity, who wishes to be in God's favour,
But achievement should require toil and labour.
Without failure, how would success be measured?
If not for pain, how exists pleasure?
To this end Satan (though unaware of the Purpose)
Sparks a war that is yet Good's impetus
Or at least provides an ample force opposing
The Good, affording us the power of choosing.
Pope gives examples of Your lofty deeds;
Milton explains how Your tension we need.

You acquaint us with all of Your little brothers
That we might be misguided through these Others.
Your sibling six i here shall praise,
For they are, by You, well trained and raised
To ruin all fools who permit them entrance
By subverting their will and negating temperance.
Dear Sloth, awake to hear my decree—
Or would someone come to listen for Thee?
No wonder God looks with disfavour on You;
A bureaucracy needs get the message through!
You lay on Your couches and feign contentment
As You try to sleep off you self-resentment.
There are starving children and people in the streets
Who enjoy their lives much more than Thee!
And who is this by the table here
With meat a-plenty and gallons of beer?
Ah, Gluttony, You focus Greed's eternal void
And in You our hungers are thus employed
To seed our Ruin and fall from Holy Grace.
But we know to repent when we see Thine Face!
Your pangs of need are ne're satiated

And You remain spiritually emaciated.
Behind you i see yet another Hunger
In a red dress fit for such a monger.
Lust! Most tempting of the deadly Six;
Men wallow in Your false Pleasure Pits.
At your beckoning Love is perverted
And Salvation, thence, is duly subverted.
Like Gluttony Your need is never filled
And Your restless soul is never stilled.
Near You is One who inspires malignity
For all who insult his fragile dignity
By daring to acquire what he has not
And against them he's forever forced to plot,
But never will he fill the darkness inside
With material things. His wants belie
His desire for inner Love and Light
And he spends his life in constant flight.
Envy, come forth from Your mirror and hear
How someone greater than Thee may be near—
Oh! Wait! Throw that not! 'Twas only in jest!
Your rage, dear Envy, would do well to Rest.
Wrath, i detect and alliance between
You and fair Envy, as we have just seen.
Your intent on vengeance is quite often admired;
By men in whom Greed has been inspired.
Greed, paternal twin of doting Pride,
With Whom You are eternally allied,
Your illusion is like a flower blooming
Which entices weak men into assuming
That they might own Your beauty rare.
Then you catch their souls in thorny snares.
They often never suspect their privation
Until it's too late to regain their salvation.

Pride, oh highest of all transgressions,
We see You in the poet's confessions
And see also that the freedom of humanity
Depends upon the existence of Thee.
For if we were not to Choose our Path,
What semblance of Goodness would we have?
And to be completely free from Thee
We would be more like Gods than Humanity.

Renee

Armstrong Atlantic State University Library

Water Music

Tiffanie L.C. Rogers

Leaves, floating on erratic rivers
we are alike in fall from summer trees
borne by the wind to our death
to the water
separated by undercurrents
of Nature's breath
gliding softly over placid
glassy stillness, life below,
until it shatters into
rapids
where
we
scream
inside
like
children
on
amusement
rides
one
final
crash
deposits us once again onto
muck-smothered stagnant water
where we listen for the
pregnant sound of
rapids.

Splash

Armstrong Atlantic State University Library

Fountain in the Park
Phillip Kandel

47

Untitled Linoleum Block Print
Natalie vonLoewenfeldt

Monet in the Center

Susan C. Burch

When by some chance I happened upon the bank of a distant shore
and the soft smooth pebbles caressed my feet upon its floor
And the brisk, briny breeze whipped past my face
with a cool refreshing countenance
And the waters reflected the sun's robust rays
as an explosion of light engulfs a mirror in shining display
a deep devotion consumes my soul
with peaceful,
tranquil,
serenity.

And when days of turmoil and trouble together knock upon my door
to steal my joy, my hope, and stress my very core
Ancient past struggles which try to debase
Anguish poisons, anxieties pace
There beacons this shore painted of a distant May
a picture, transforms restores my day
with peaceful,
tranquil,
serenity.

Zebra

Armstrong Atlantic State University Library

Searching
Keemba Davis

The Sound—and the Silence

Virginia Gray McCoy

What price freedom? How far must an individual compromise his/her values in order to survive? Is it necessary to die in order to be free? In the Amish community one may have to die to be free. Death can be the greatest form of living you will ever know because if you have committed a crime in the Amish community, the punishment is shunning, and this ritual is more than just ignoring an individual's deviations from the established/enforced norm. Shunning in my former closed community was the punishment for such unpardonable sins as failing to be obedient, non-compliance with community rules, and lack of adherence to religious dogma. This ritual is the death knell of the person who dares to be an individual.

I remember my funeral quite well. I was 18 years old, and I had dared to ask to go to school outside the community and to become a teacher in the public education system. Furthermore, I had refused to marry the 40+ year old man who had been selected for me by the elders. I was a dissident and you know what happens to dissidents—exile and death. Yes, I died over 30 years ago, and I am alive to tell the tale.

My day of reckoning began on June 10, 1963 when I graduated from the local high school. I was scheduled to be married the next day to my father's neighbor two miles down the road. I had never met the man except in church, and that is hardly enough to build a marriage on. However, my father was delighted that his rebellious, embarrassing, nonconformist daughter would be married to a man who vowed that he would make a proper wife out of me, and that I would learn respect for our ways whether I liked it or not. My father was looking forward to Saturday with baited breath. I was staring certain death in the face and knew it. I was dragged to the church the next day and the ceremony began. I was expected to take my vows, be silent, and thank God that someone had decided to marry me. I was no prize, and I had been told why all too many times. I could not sew, can food, cook, or raise chickens like most of my peers. I also had the embarrassing habit of reading literature and had the audacity to taint my father's house with the abomination.

Even before the ceremony began, I had decided that, regardless of the cost, I would have to embarrass my father once more. I was not marrying that man and that was that. When the time came to sign the marriage certificate (the bride does not say "I do"; that is reserved for her father because he makes the "deal"), I boldly said "No!" Utter silence filled the room; it was deafening in its loudness. Everyone was stunned! How could

I possibly hurt my family so; I was marrying one of the richest men in the community and also one of my father's closest friends. No! How dare I? I knew that I would have to pay for my crime, but I must admit I was not prepared for the outcome.

My father had suffered the last bit of abuse he was willing to take on my account, and he acted swiftly. Without a word, he immediately took off his blue collar, symbol of being my father on my wedding day, and threw it into the furnace/stove that heated the meeting house. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was being disowned by him and the community sanctions were soon to follow.

Because I had such a long history of miscreancy, the elders decided that I could not remain in the community, so I was asked to leave. This I refused to do; after all, I had a right to live where I liked. How dare they say I could not build a small house on the property my grandfather had left me? They could shun me if they liked, but I would not lose my property to boot. My mistake. I should have left quietly. My father's outrage at this last act of defiance led him to ask for the ultimate punishment—death. The counsel agreed, and my father began to select my burial plot.

I watched with horror from my bedroom window as my father began digging my grave. He selected my favorite spot as a child, the big oak tree in the lower forty. I'd had a tree house there as a child. I can still remember my grandfather and me building it the year before he died; I was eight. Now, ten years later, the very boards of that tree house would form my coffin. You see, no useful wood can be used to bury a criminal. New wood still possesses life to the Amish because it still smells of cedar or pine, the heart blood of the wood. Only the pure, the clean, the deserving may have a coffin make of new wood; the life of one given to house the soul of the other until both are in God's presence.

I remember the deafening sound of my father's silent digging. The rasping sound as the shovel and pick pried away at the resistant ground beneath that majestic oak. The sound of the crowbar as it scraped and scratched against the stones; the sound of the resistant stone hitting the wet dirt with a mushy thud. The silent thud, thud, thudding as the newly raped earth was piled to one side in a neat mound next to the rolled back sod. My father worked for about two hours as he prepared the ground for my body. (He needn't have bothered; I was already dead. Listening to him before the counsel had killed me already; I had been buried more than a week ago.) His task completed, he went to the barn to help the carpenters prepare my box.

To be assured that my brother would not be so foolish, he had made him take down the old tree house three days earlier so that there would be no trace remaining that I had ever lived. So, I spent my last night at home

listening to the men sawing, the quiet rasping of the old tarnished saws against the well-weathered old pine boards. The gentle, purposeful hammering of the squeaking peg nails as they were forced into the old wood. I listened to the gentle falling rains against the window panes, and wondered if anyone was crying—I was assured that God was not. I watched and listened until early dawn and the rosy fingers of nature painted the gloomy sky—or was it really a bright sunny day? I don't remember; I'm sure the community does.

At dawn the community women gathered to help dress the body. You see, in our community, a body is actually buried. Everyone brings anything that the deaceased made that they have received as a gift and puts these items into the coffin along with our clothes and personal belongings. This act purges the community of our essence, cleansing them of any iniquity they may have received along with our gifts. Once all things have been placed in the coffin, the burial is official except for the closing of the earth.

The community joined hands and encircled the now living corpse who had been dragged out to watch!! There must be no mistake that you are dead, and all the community must acknowledge the judgement in the presence of everyone else. From this point forward, anyone giving you refuge is subject to the same discipline for they too are possessed of the devil and must be purged from the body politic. Why a circle? Because it represents the circle of life, the binding chain that connects everyone to everyone else.

Once the circle is complete, the sentence is formally spoken and the coffin is lowered into the ground. I watched my father's emotionless face as he and my overwrought brother lowered me into the earth. Coffin in place, the community gathered to finish the job. Each member turned their back to me, picked up a handful of dirt, and threw it into the hole. I listened to the scouring sound of the small rocks against the old wood, a hollow sound as one by one the gravel fell. The rocks made a pitter-pattering sound as they fell, counting off my sins for all to hear. With each person's throw, however, the sound began to change, first scraping then grating, next scratching, as the dirt descended to fill the gaping hole. The ritual took over 45 minutes as each person pronounced judgement and walked, back turned, away. The empty glass which was my grave was filling and the hollow sound lessened with each passing eon, as I stood transfixed. The scarred earth was then leveled, the sod replaced, the ground tamped down with their shovels, as the men returned to their mid-day work/routine without so much as a flutter of their consciences.

I was left standing alone, looking at my grave, with only the sound of the old oak in my ears. The oak and I said goodbye, and I turned down the

road, dead, but still breathing. I walked to the nearest town, over 20 miles away, and signed my name on the Army recruitment form. I boarded a bus days later and paid the local Catholic church the $80.00 I owed them (out of my first military pay) for my two day hotel/dinning bill as I awaited the final bus to my new life.

I have visited my grave only once since my death. When I left the military, I was returned to my home town in accordance with their discharge policy. I noted that things had not changed. My grave was maintained; grass cut, weeds pulled, but no flowers, for those are reserved for the deserving, not the dissident. Why bother maintaining the grave at all? Well, you see, the circle of "friends" does not end; one is also buried in a circular fashion as well. The body is placed in the middle of the family burial plot (always reserved) and it is surrounded by the dead family members, whose grave markers have been turned to face outward, thus shunning us throughout eternity!!

What is the cost of preserving one's identity? What is the cost of being an individual? Of having pride (the ultimate sin)? DEATH. Funny things sometimes happen though Death can bring a great deal of LIFE as well. Yes, I am still alive and my brother has taken the risk of acknowledging my letters now and again. He even sends me fall leaves from my favorite old oak tree. It may sound funny, but those leaves have given me more strength than you can imagine. I do hope to return home one day. Why? To walk among the beautiful fall leaves, to hear the gentle rustling of those dead leaves upon the dried branches, and to hear the birds twitter for a final time before flying south. Yes, I have a new life, but I am still tied to the community; my best and dearest friend, my brother, is still imprisoned there.

Passage

L. V. Charlotte

D[Blue eyes against
backdrop of antiseptic
sheets reveal final
existence. We both
anticipate a journey.
Passage. Irony.]AD

Stairway to My Room
Elizabeth Ann Clarke

Pond House

Armstrong Atlantic State University Library

Short Memories

Response to James Schuyler's "A Few Days"

Dana Sheppard

are for the loved ones. They die
so young sometimes.
It's beautiful. They gave me one
of her table clothes
her mother made. So beautiful
white and delicate.
What day is it? It's Halloween,
October 31st
and all the ghost and goblins
are out
knocking on doors. My granddaughter
dressed as a shepherd.
She bit her cousin on the hand
and got spanked.
She asked me if I would bite her?
I said no.
My brother asked me to write
a story
about him. He said to call it
"Legend in His Own Mind."
What a title for a biography of
my brother!
I think I would call it "Haney."
"Handy Haney."
That's his nickname. I think I would
call it "Cow Poke."
That's what he is. He works on
a farm. He drives a tractor and bales hay. Our
father used to help
until he passed away. I do
miss him so.
I have a professor who is
my friend. She is
kind and has two dogs. Why
do lovely people like
her retire and go away? She is my
mentor. She loves

to read books, and she writes well.
One day, she
will publish her stories, "Dogs
and Other Men."
I want to be there when her books
are signed.
To Dana, With Love. That's
what it will say.
Those books she'll sign for
me and I'll
cherish them. My children will
ask one day
Whose autograph is this? And
I'll say
Helon's, my friend. I had another
friend-Janice
She's gone now. You know the one.
Her daughters gave
me the crocheted tablecloth. It's a
keepsake and I
will always treasure it because
she was hers.
My husband is talking over the
back fence
with the neighbor, Tom. They talk
about nonsense and
work and stuff. I get to keep
my grandson tomorrow
night. He's four months old and
at a cute age.
Will we rock? Yes, we will rock
and coo.
He is here and I'm enjoying his
sweet smile
and his cries. He loves to cuddle up
near my neck.
I love to feel his warmth. Tomorrow is
Sunday. I made
potato salad tonight. I think we'll have
ham tomorrow,
Tonight, my cousin from Washington
DC came by.

She's 60 years old-still so beautiful.
Her husband came
along too. He loved my black-eyed
peas. Where are
they going? Down into Florida to
see their son and wife.
They have a new baby girl. Do you like
plants? Me too!
I bought a new one today. Another
purple violet.
How will they survive a winter
without light?
I asked myself, then went and
bought a light-
A growth light for plants. Now I
will have blooming
violets all year round. And my young
plants will live.
And donate life and beauty to my
Short Memories.

Going Home

Denise R. Shaw

Once again, Emily Metts needed to summon her energies and prepare for her visit back home. As she sat at the edge of her bed, suitcase in hand, her long, thin limbs felt heavy and unwilling to cooperate with the task at hand. Going home to New Orleans was always an emotionally exhausting exercise and Emily welcomed the preparation by acknowledging the customary tinge of nausea which usually went hand in hand with the anticipation. Facing her father had not gotten easier over the years as Emily had hoped it would, but not going home would break her mother's heart, and the good Lord knows she didn't need any more of that.

"Hey, Em," shouted her husband, Rob, from up in the attic, "Do you want me to bring down the hanging bag, too?"

"No, I don't think so, the casual look is all I'm up for. Is that OK with you?"

Emily knew her question would surprise Rob, as she usually failed to include him in any aspect of the plans for going to New Orleans. She knew Rob usually tolerated being relegated as an observer, but this trip she really needed to have his support, and she felt the best way to enlist him was to include him from the start.

"Yeah... casual is fine with me," said Rob as he entered the bedroom.

Emily had not moved from the edge of the bed. She sat motionless, with her head hung, fidgeting with an old airline name tag. Her dark, brown eyes had that distant gaze in them that she knew Rob hated, but she couldn't help it. Rob sat down next to her and held her restless hands still with his large, rough hands.

"You know, we don't have to go," said Rob compassionately.

"Yeah, right!" snapped Emily.

Rob withdrew his caress and walked toward the door with hasty and rigid steps. "I'm going to make a pot of coffee; it's going to be a long evening," he said in a resigned tone.

"Wait," said Emily. She reached out and grasped his hand. "I'm sorry. You know it's not you." she raised his hand to her lips and kissed it softly. "Coffee would be nice."

Rob just shook his head. "God, Emily. This is pathetic!" he said with disgust as he turned to leave the bedroom. "I just don't get it.!"

"What, Rob! What exactly don't you get?"

"Don't insult me, Em. You know exactly what I mean. You know what really pisses me off about all this? It's the way we end up at each other's

throats. I'm sick of this. If you want to put yourself through this... well, just do it without me. I'm done."

"Oh, Rob. Don't do this to me. You know I don't have a choice."

"Yes, Em. Yes, you do. Grow up! And, don't even think about putting this on me. I haven't done a thing to you. I am so tired of this shit. I'm out of here."

Rob picked up his keys and charged his six-foot frame angrily out the door. Emily did not move from her spot on the end of the bed. Her eyes welled up with tears, but she would not allow herself to cry. Not again. Crying had never solved anything for Emily. Hell... it didn't even make her feel better; so she learned some time ago to stop the tears. And, she did. Besides, she needed some space to deal with this ritual. Yes, let Rob go and spare him her zombie-like state. She could handle this.

Emily stood slowly and stretched her long limbs. She placed the suitcase on the bed and flipped open the locks. Inside she noticed a doubloon from last year's Mardi Gras trip. She picked up the shiny, purple coin and rubbed it between her finger tips.

"Hey, Em," her brother Nick had shouted, "You want another beer?"

"She doesn't need another beer," Em's father, Ryan, had bellowed. "She's had three already."

"Oh, Ryan, let her be. It's her vacation," pleaded Patty, Emily's mom.

"Shut up, Patty. No one asked you for your opinion," scolded Ryan.

"Yeah, I'll take another beer," said Emily. She glared in her father's general direction, the put her arm around Patty's frail shoulders and led her down the block toward an upcoming float. "I can't believe you let him talk to you like that," said Em. The two rolled their eyes at each other, like a secret handshake, and walked on.

Looking back now, Em realized that she had no business criticizing her mother. She was no better. Ignoring her father did not empower her, as she convinced herself. It only removed her one step further from confronting him... just like everyone else.

"That bastard," mumbled Emily to herself as she tossed the doubloon in the garbage can. She moved toward her closet and began to pull some sweaters off the top shelf. Emily breathed a heavy, deep sigh and thought about Rob. She didn't blame him for leaving. She knew he despised these trips because he always became the object of her displaced misery. For the first time she wondered how much longer he would tolerate any of this.

She smiled to herself as she remembered the first time Rob confronted her father during a trip home. It was over a black velvet evening dress Emily had put on to wear to her fifteenth high school class reunion.

"Just who do you think you're going to impress in that get-up?" Ryan had said snidely.

"You look beautiful, honey," Rob had said, knowing how painstakingly Emily had searched for the right dress.

"She looks like a street-walker," said Ryan. "That peroxide look doesn't help! You should be embarrassed to be seen with her... unless you like that kind of woman."

"You know, Ryan," said Rob between clenched teeth, "You are a real son of a bitch."

Ryan chuckled aloud and said, "What do you mean 'are'? Don't tell me you believe all that hysterical crap she's told you. I thought you were more of a man than that."

"Come on guys," said Patty in her most soothing tone, "Let's not do this."

"Shut up!" snipped Ryan. "No one wants to listen to you."

"Man, what a dick!" Rob had mumbled to no one in particular. "Come on Em, get your stuff. We're staying in a hotel." He walked over to Patty, who was sobbing, put his arm around her shoulder and whispered, "Sorry."

At the time, Em was so proud of Rob. No one ever stood up to her father. It definitely was the highlight of that trip. But, now Emily realized that it wasn't Rob's responsibility to confront her dad...it was hers. And once again, she had chickened out. That was the story of her relationship with her father. He reprimanded, he demoralized, he demanded, and she chickened out. Ever since she realized that she could confront him, but had not, the anger she internalized had caused her an ulcer. "Yep," she thought every time she guzzled Maalox straight out of the bottle, "This burning feeling is compliments of Ryan."

She suddenly realized that she had just folded and unfolded the same sweater three times. She sat back down on the edge of the bed and sighed. "Get a grip," she thought to herself, "You've got to get on with this. Maybe a glass of wine would help. Yeah...a glass of wine." She shuffled into the kitchen and reached into the cabinet for a wine glass.

Her mind shifted back to Rob. "I wonder where he is?" she thought. "I hope he comes home soon." She poured half a glass of Cabernet and took a swig straight out of the bottle. The burn down her throat felt good. She leaned against the counter top and held the wine glass up toward the light. The scarlet prism within the glass mesmerized her and she savored the momentary sense of calm.

The taste of Cabernet Sauvignon on her lips reminded her of the night her parents took her to dinner at Brennan's to celebrate her academic scholarship to Loyola. She knew her father had expected nothing less, and was pleased that she had done something to make him proud of her. She always worked hard to receive his recognition and knew that the scholar-

ship was something good. He had ordered a bottle of wine with dinner, along with an extra glass for her. The evening had gone well. He was even being civil toward Patty. When the waiter brought the wine to the table, Ryan had poured them each a glass, lifted his into the air and said, "A toast...here's to Emily on her scholarship to college. Let's hope she doesn't screw it up by getting pregnant." Silence descended upon the dinner party like a plague.

Emily took another swig of wine and tried to recall any moment of tenderness showered upon her by her father. She remembered that once, when she was eight years old, he gently applied a Band-Aid to her knee after she had fallen off her bicycle. She also remembered him saying something about her being too old to fall. She shook her head in sorrow.

She decided that she needed to return to the task of packing and proceeded back into the bedroom. She turned and grabbed the bottle of wine as an afterthought. She held the bottle of Cabernet to her mouth to take another big swig of wine and froze as the bottle was almost up to her lips. She could not control the tears then, and as her sobs shook her limbs violently, she slid down the cabinets onto the cold Italian tile. When Rob came home, he found her curled up in the fetal position, sound asleep. He brushed the blonde, tear-soaked hair from her face and softly whispered, "Hey, Em. I'm home."

"Oh, God! What time is it? Look at me! Oh Rob...I'm so sorry!" she said softly as she wrapped her arms around his neck. The smell of nicotine, beer, and Geoffrey Beene cologne made her nauseous, and as she bolted upright to run into the bathroom, she began sobbing all over again.

Rob sat on the edge of the bed, with his long body hunched over, and waited patiently for Emily to come out of the bathroom. "Em, this has got to stop," said Rob disgustedly. "I am sick of watching you do this to yourself."

Emily emerged from the bathroom looking pale and disheveled. She plopped her body down on the bed next to Rob. "Let's not do this, Rob. I'm not up for it."

"You never are, Em. Not with me, and certainly not with your father. You just withdraw and self-destruct."

Emily let out a deep, slow sigh. "I know, Rob. I know," said Emily in a resigning tone.

"Well, damn it, Em. Do something about it. Please!" said Rob as he stood up from the bed in a rapid, stiff motion.

"Rob!" said Emily as she jerked her head up quickly. "Please don't go. Not again." Emily paused and exhaled a long, deep sigh. "I know what I have to do, and I know it will break my mother's heart. I can't bear the thought of hurting her, Rob; she has been through enough."

"Stop using her as the reason you continue to go home...that's not fair to her. This is about you, Em. You and your father."

A dead silence penetrated the room. The low hum of the air conditioning unit kicking in stirred the chill in the air. Emily could not look at Rob. Now the cards were on the table. Now she would have to act...one way or another.

"Em, aren't you going to say anything?"

"No, Rob. Not this minute. Because, I don't know what to say. I'm sorry." Emily turned and hastily proceeded to the bathroom to battle a second round of nausea and her conscience.

Rob retreated downstairs to the den to lose himself in a remote control daze.

As Emily lay prostrate on the cold bathroom floor, visions of her childhood came flooding back. She couldn't remember her father showering affection upon her, but she could remember times when he had shown her mother some tenderness. Maybe her mother was where she wanted to be. Why hadn't she seen it before? Emily guessed that she wanted to believe that she wasn't the only one who suffered her father's contempt. As the cold floor sent a chill through her limbs, Emily knew that the time had come to do something. Anything! She could not go on like this. The thought of confronting her father was frightening, but she couldn't bear the thought of losing Rob. Rob was her life now, not her parents. The thought of allowing the looming presence of her father to take another precious thing away from her made her angry.

Yes, angry! Emily bolted upright. She closed her eyes and filled her lungs with cool air. She welcomed the sense of peacefulness that had overtaken her. She was unsure if she should credit the wine or the epiphany, but regardless, she knew it was time to use the moment constructively.

Emily got up off the floor, went over to the basin, splashed cold water on her face, brushed her teeth, and ran the comb through her hair. She took a deep breath and walked across the room over to the telephone. She picked up the receiver and dialed her parents' number. Ryan answered the call.

"Hi, Dad. It's Emily."

"Well, Miss Emily. And to what do we owe the honor of this call? Hold on, I'll get your mother."

"No, Dad. Wait. It is you I need to speak to."

"Oh! Well, what is it? Do you need money?"

"No, Dad. It's not that. I just wanted to tell you that I'm not coming home. My home is here, in Atlanta, with Rob. And Dad, this is really hard for me to say, but I just don't need to keep banging my head against walls trying to please you. I've never been able to, and I have to stop trying. It

hurts me too much. I'm sorry, Daddy."

"But, what about your mother? You'll break her heart."

"No, Daddy. I won't. I think that Mom will understand." Emily paused to wipe a tear from her cheek. "And if she doesn't, well...I hope in time she will. Please tell mom that I'll call tomorrow. Bye, Dad."

"Wait...Emily."

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

Emily gently laid the receiver down and reached for a tissue to stop the stream of tears that had begun flowing down her raw cheeks. Then she felt Rob's weight distribute on the bed next to her. He kissed her cheek softly and said, "I love you, Em."

"I love you, too, Rob."

"Hey, Em. I've been thinking. Why don't we send your mom an airline ticket?"

Emily flung her arms around Rob's neck. She relished the warmth of his strong arms around her waist, and the stale smell of nicotine and beer that reeked from his flannel shirt. She felt safe in his arms, and loved. Really loved. Emily knew that she had finally made it home.

Candles #2
Sara E. Goodson

Armstrong Atlantic State
University Library

georgia

for jacob's fury

Melissa S. Hill

Storm clouds have gathered.
I think it's going to rain.
Georgia can be a mass
Of wet red clay at this
Time of year. You've never
Seen mud this deep,
In our yard in our dreams.

Still clinging to chains
Broken long ago, the time-
Table of the South is a bit
Askew, we still ride forth
On our make-believe horses,
Tilting at windmills, a
State of Don Quixotes.

Sitting with my grandfather
On his front porch,
It's not the heat but the humidity
And it just gets worse
From here on out.
How do I call back
Through our murky history,
Cloudier than the pond
In his backyard?

Sometimes I can't believe
We closed our eyes so tightly,
It's almost unreal,
What we refused to see.
And I ask myself if I am
Guilty by association for walking
The same dogwooded roads.

A strange place indeed
To be born into
Cotton as high as self-
Righteousness and attitude
Screaming through the entirety
Of our being
But I suppose pain is fleeting.

The same pines still confess our
Sins, bending backwards in an
Electrical wind. The things they've
Seen could bring us crashing down.
Have we been forgiven,
Have we forgiven ourselves?

Small comfort that some of us
Have kept our eyes open all along,
But I hear a secret whistling through
The Spanish Moss:
Until we bring down the walls
That divided and conquer us,
We cannot rise again.

Six Bittersweet Minutes

Denise R. Shaw

"I need a price check on line six," shouted the check-out clerk.

"Oh great!" I thought, "This is all I need!" The clock was already ticking away at the twenty-two minutes and thirty seconds I had remaining until the post office closed.

As I looked up to glare at the idiot in front of me who was stealing time from my already tight schedule, I was jolted at the sight of his dark hair curling up behind his ears. Suddenly, my watch no longer mattered as I remembered my arms around Mike's waist as we stood in line waiting to buy a ticket to "The Way We Were." It was a cool evening and he had wrapped his long flannel-covered arms around mine to keep them warm. I turned my face sideways and pressed my left cheek into the warmth of his back. The smell of British Sterling mixed with Irish Spring soap drifted through my nostrils. I loved the way he smelled. We were enveloped in a warm silence as we swayed back and forth in unison in an attempt to ward off the chilling breeze. I lifted by head from the warmth of his back to whisper, "I love you" in his ear. Then I noticed those curls. I wondered why he just didn't cut them. Those silly curls made his meticulous appearance look unkempt. I untangled my arm from his and ran my fingers through those curls and said, "Why don't you cut these things?" instead of "I love you."

"Ma'am, ma'am, you can move your cart up now," said the check-out clerk. I looked up as if I was moving in slow motion. "Excuse me?" I said.

"Your cart, move it up," he said impatiently.

"Oh sure. I'm sorry," I said.

I glanced at my watch. I had eighteen minutes until the post office closed. And he was gone; the man with the curls behind his ears was gone. I took a long deep breath and tried to savor the feel of flannel and the smell of British Sterling, but the memory was fading. What a shame the line had moved so quickly.

Salad

Don Newman

As you gently, but firmly prepared the lettuce
I was thinking, "Let us begin"
And as I watched you slice the tomatoes
I thought maybe this wasn't such a bad idea
You and me.
The way you handled the cucumber was simply divine.
By the time the peppers, onions and radishes went in
I had to have you
And wished we could do this all the time....

For the Lady Behind Me in the Grocery Store

Marti Baker

I know what you see
I know what you think
You're just an outsider looking in
Or over my shoulder, to see how I will pay for this food
You don't know my situation
You don't know what I'm like
You only see another
BLACK GIRL
with those WIC VOUCHERS.

I know what you see
I know what you think
You're figuring that because I have those
WIC VOUCHERS, I collect
FOOD STAMPS and get
WELFARE CHECKS for my
THREE kids, whose father is not around.
You see my clothes, and think I use the
MONEY for MYSELF.

What you don't see, and
What you don't think is
YES, I get WIC VOUCHERS
but I DON'T receive
FOOD STAMPS.
I DON'T get a WELFARE CHECK, but I used to.
You see I began working. I got myself
TWO JOBS and they
CUT ME OFF.
I'm probably one of those accomplished
persons you'll never meet.

What you don't know is that I'm not a
SORRY STATISTIC.
I'm another
SUCCESSFUL BLACK FEMALE
who had an unfortunate beginning
but will have a miraculous ending.
Someday, I'll probably teach your children or even your grandchildren
But you'll never know,
because you let the outside fool you.

Superman
Keemba Davis

Reflections
Phillip Kandel

Hug Yaself
Robb Ashman

Your Smile Is Sweet Deceit

John Trainor

Your smile is sweet deceit.
"Do you want to follow?"
over the flowering pattern
flowing in silk
swaying across the cleft of your...
creaking stairs.
- Teasing electricity
with gleaming stares
that twinkle,
"Come closer."
- Igniting secrets
upon our canvases slide
with wetness matching our tongues collide.
Painting a picture
with mischievous laughter
that no one will ever see
when inside the shadows, we hide

...And in our minds
We can follow the traces
Of whispers left behind.

Getting Down

Mike Rios

Ruben's cigarettes lay on the floor underneath his boxers. He was breathing hard as he reached for them, his shoulders heaving, his heart visibly pounding against his slim bare chest. But Courtney picked up the cigarettes before he could. She was breathing, as well as sweating, he now noticed, just as hard as he was. With a smile, Ruben watched her flick two cigarettes, and thought how glad he was that he had not reached the pack first.

Ruben stood, walked across the bedroom, and picked his jeans up from where Courtney had thrown them. He was surprised how easily he found them, and that he found them at all, among the strewn dirty laundry, used romance books, and drained liquor bottles which, night after night, competed with the furniture for dominance over the room. It seemed the only things in order were the two framed black and white photographs, each of the same crucifix (one sun-draped, the other enveloped in shadow), that hung above the head of the bed.

The photographs, gifts from him to Courtney, were the results of an entire day spent patiently waiting on a scar-freckled pew in St. Francis. He had wanted to capture the wonderful and frightening details of the crucifix he had stared at so often during masses as a child. But after developing them, he felt he had failed. He had never allowed anyone to view them until he met Courtney, who instantly demolished Ruben's insecurity, which had caused the photographs to remain buried in his portfolio for so long. Her comments were insightful, refreshing, and above all, honest. The two had spent the rest of the evening ecstatically trading thoughts.

Now, as he looked at the photographs, it dawned on him that the moment he had shared his art with Courtney was indeed a turning point. Up until that moment his photography had been the last thing on his mind. An unfulfilling tour of duty in the Army, compounded by returning to find his family comfortably adjusted to his absence, had made sure of that. Courtney's overwhelming interest in his art, had revived his own interest. So it was with a wrenching mixture of regret and guilt that he questioned the uneasiness he felt tonight.

He took his lighter out of the jeans he had picked up, tossed them, and walked back over to Courtney. She was still in the same position: laying on her stomach, propped on her elbows, between the window and the bed that faced it. Her milky-white legs were crossed at the calves, creating a delicate dimple in the back of each knee. He knelt and lit the two ciga-

rettes, watching her small breasts rise slightly as she took a drag off both and gave one to him. After taking a drag, he blew smoke out slowly as she rose. The harsh smell of tobacco punched through the smells of sweat, sin, and sex congregating in the room. He welcomed it.

"Something's gonna go wrong," he said in a deep whisper.

She stared at his feet and blew a cloud of smoke that embraced his shin. He could not see her face, only her tangled red hair. He remembered how its striking color was the first thing he had noticed about her.

"I don't think I thought this all out," he added.

"Don't start," she said. "Please don't start."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked up at him, her raised eyebrows answering his question.

"I'm just wondering if it's worth it. If ..."

"If it's worth it?" Courtney interrupted, standing. "Take a look around you. Of course it's worth it. You think I'd be going along if it wasn't?"

"And as far as thinking it all out, you haven't left anything to chance," she continued as she walked to the bathroom. "I've got the photos and the negatives next to my purse, Tommy and Junior've been at Miller's since eight, and I called Garduno's guy right before you got here, just to make sure we were still on. Everything's set up for tonight, Ruben. Nothing's gonna go wrong."

She left him there alone, listening to the toilet flush followed by a faucet being opened. The running water was loud, making him aware of how unusually silent the room, the apartment, and the city were tonight. There was usually too much noise. The 4, 5, and 6 trains passed above ground only three blocks away, their constant rattling more like a natural or background rhythm to him by now. He could not recall whether he had heard one since arriving at Courtney's. Normally he could since the apartment was located only four stories up. The weather was probably the reason. The pushers and the hookers should have been out at this hour, but Ruben guessed even they got cold once in a while. Whatever the reason, he was thankful. It meant he would not get hounded to buy rock or weed or whatever else was the special of the day.

Ruben remembered how it was when he used to walk to St. Francis with his little brother for ten o'clock mass, or "teen mass" as it was cleverly called. It was a strategy employed by the church in order to get kids to receive the word of God, while instilling a sense of independence. On the way, Ruben and his brother, along with other kids, had to pass the local pushers, who were as pervasive as roaches. For the most part, he and his brother ignored them, occasionally shaking their heads, sometimes actually saying 'no.' To Ruben, though, it was not the fact that he was being tempted that bothered him. He had never succumbed to peer pressure.

There were too many friends and family members allowing drugs to rot their bodies and minds for him to join the crowd. What bothered him was that he had to see this on the way to church. It was all right if they wanted to push at midnight on a corner somewhere but, on a Sunday morning, right across from...?

A white flash.

He was back in Courtney's apartment. She was shaking him, yelling, "What's the hell's the matter with you?"

"What?"

"You've been sitting there saying 'no' over and over again. And you're about to start a fire."

He looked at his cigarette. There was a tiny bit of tobacco, glowing red, in between an inch of ashes and browned filter, each precariously dangling. As he put the cigarette out, he said, "Shut that water off. You think you're the only one who uses water in this city?"

She shook her head and playfully stormed back into the bathroom, leaving a trail of wet footprints behind. Ruben heard the sound of running water cease and the sound of a siren begin. He smiled to himself and began getting dressed, still listening to the siren as its whooping heightened, came to a blaring climax, and then faded. He wondered what kind of scene the police officer was headed to. Was it a robbery? Had some 7-11 been held up? Was it a domestic call? Was some two hundred pound drunk using his ninety pound wife's face as a stress reliever? Or maybe it was a murder scene? Did some kid disrespect another by laughing at that kid's braces and wind up with something funnier in his own mouth, like the barrel of a pistol? Or was there another serial killer on the loose, poised for bigger headlines than the last guy, who wanted only to avenge his tiny penis' damaged reputation by relieving a number of homosexuals of theirs, quite literally? In about a half hour, that siren could be for me, Ruben pondered. He was finished getting dressed when Courtney came out of the bathroom.

"I've gotta get going," he said. "Where's the gun?"

"It's right here," Courtney replied, brushing aside a pair of purple panties and picking up his pistol. She walked over to him and put her arms around his waist. Then she kissed him. Her tongue delicately met his as she gently lifted his jacket and softly slid his pistol into the holster in the small of his back. She pulled her mouth away slowly.

"We'll celebrate afterwards," Ruben promised.

"All night," she responded, clearly happy his confidence had been restored.

"Just the night?" Ruben asked with a look of fake pain.

Courtney laughed. "We'll see how long you last. Now get going."

Ruben watched her go into the bathroom. He heard the water run again

as he let himself out. Neither had offered their apartment keys to the other, so all he could do was shut the door.

He stood in front of the apartment for a few seconds, pushers and church on his mind. He wondered how he had gone from detesting people like those pushers from his childhood to doing business with them. He told himself that it was nothing more than a financial opportunity for Courtney and him. And it was hardly as if he were dealing with them on a daily basis; it was only tonight. And it wasn't like I went looking for them, he told himself, they came to me. And in that respect he was correct.

He recalled the night last month when, while developing photos of a cop tucking in a bag lady in Central Park, he had received a phone call on behalf of a Leonardo Garduno asking if Ruben would like to earn money with his camera.

Ruben had heard of Garduno; everyone had. He also knew how Garduno made his money, another piece of common and unspoken knowledge. That, and the fact that Garduno even had Ruben's number, had made him think twice about refusing to at least hear the offer.

It turned out all Ruben had to do was use that pretty little camera of his to shoot some pictures of a certain district attorney meeting with a certain bourough president. Ruben recognized their names: Marvin Costello, a tough by-the-book D.A., and Orlando A. Garcia, a no-nonsense bourough president with obvious mayoral aspirations. Ruben knew enough about politics to suppose these men's positions led their paths to cross once in a while and figured he would be capturing a pay-off of some kind. "Sure, I guess I can take some pics of their meeting," he had said. No, he didn't get it, the caller had told him, Garduno wanted him to take pictures of the D.A. *with* the bourough president. A noiseless "Oh" was all Ruben could form in response. He gathered himself, and after asking why him (because he wasn't part of the family, it wouldn't get back to Garduno if there was a stink), how much (a rather substantial amount), and when (all up to him, the sooner the photos were delivered, the more substantial the amount), Ruben had said he would think about it. Sure, the caller had said, think it over.

This was his chance, he had thought. This was the opportunity which would grant him enough financial stability to enable him to concentrate more on his photography and a future in it. But this opportunity came with a moral price Ruben was forced to contemplate. Two men's careers would perish, their families devastated in the wake of the scandal these photos would unleash. Unless Garduno intended to use them as blackmail, which seemed unlikely to Ruben when he considered the outrageous amount of money he was supposed to be paid. But there was another kind of blackmail, Ruben knew, the kind that got the blackmailer something far more

precious than money. Garduno apparently had aspirations of his own. All night Ruben had tried to piece together the greater goal and the repercussions if he agreed to take the pictures.

The next morning, still awake, Ruben had received another call.

He shook his head, bringing himself back to the present, and looked around the empty hallway. The incinerator a few feet in front of him caught his eye. It was half-opened, part of a stained paper trashbag, seemingly full, sticking out. How lazy can someone be? Ruben pushed the trashbag in and watched it fall. He closed the lid before the heat and smell could hit him. If only it was this easy to throw away other trash, he thought.

Ruben turned and walked to the stairs. He began descending them, as he always did after leaving Courtney's. He remembered how she had laughed when he had confessed how nervous the elevator here made him especially with its menacing sliding gate, paint peeling off the bars like flakes of sun-burnt skin, reminding him of a prison he had never been confined in. He had not called her for a week after that. She never laughed about, or even mentioned, the elevator ever again.

He descended one flight and was halfway down the next when he heard a couple of voices. Loud voices. He stopped to listen.

"It's a four," said one voice. It was somewhat high, yet it undoubtedly belonged to a man.

"It's a two, man." This voice was deep, authoritative, and definitely masculine.

"I'm telling you, it's a four. It says four A."

"How can it be a four? Huh? Tell me. How can this be a four? I can understand a seven, maybe a three, in a way. But a four? Uh uh."

"It's a four."

"Look, it's a fucking two. All right? Two. Two! Now take out your piece and let's get this over with."

A sweet old widow lived in 2A. Ruben did not know her name, but she always said hello whenever she saw him. His hand went to his back and gripped the pistol there. The stairs were built so that each flight was divided into two sets of steps. In between, the person climbing or descending would face a window before turning to continue. Thanks to this simple economical design, the men could not see him as he edged slowly around the stairs.

"What the hell are you doing? Mind your own business!" Ruben thought to himself.

His doubt was answered by a gunshot and a flash. His ears started ringing as he saw one of the men kick open the door. A dog started barking from within one of the apartments down the hall.

Do something!

Ruben drew his pistol and aimed towards the men. "Police! Freeze!" he automatically shouted.

The two men turned, blinked and fired at him.

He heard the window shatter behind him and felt the night's cold air rush in and slap the back of his exposed neck. One of the men was in his sight. He squeezed the trigger and heard it fire, but the man just stood there and fired again. He heard more glass shatter and felt more cold air, another slap, and realized it was not his gun he had heard. It had been the man's gun. He had misfired.

He turned and ran up the few steps he had descended, and dove to his right. I should've taken the elevator.

"Let's get outta here, Nick," he heard the somewhat high voice say.

Ruben cocked his pistol.

"You crazy? That's him," the deep voice said.

Ruben froze. He didn't hear the click his pistol should have made as the next bullet made its way into the chamber. He pulled the slide back. Nothing. He let go, then pulled again. Nothing. His hands shook. He heard footsteps. He quickly pressed the release button on the pistol's handle and removed the cartridge. Empty.

This was not good.

He ran up the stairs as fast as he could, taking three steps at a time, reached the third floor, and rounded the stairs. He could still hear footsteps. Of course you can hear footsteps, he thought. They're after you!

He reached the fourth floor and ran towards Courtney's apartment. Once there, he grabbed the knob and looked at the number and letter stenciled above the peephole for an instant. Then he turned the knob and opened the door. He slammed it shut behind him and slid the lock when he heard another gunshot. A hole the size of a penny appeared in the door.

Ruben ran to the bedroom, where he found Courtney crouched in a corner clutching her legs. She stared at him, her mouth hanging open, her eyes threatening to leap from their sockets. He looked around the room in desperation, trying to think of something. Then his eyes fixed on something shimmering. Laying atop the dresser were eight bullets, laughing at him.

A gunshot.

Another.

There was no time to load his pistol. Besides the apartment was small; a firefight here would be too chancy. Instead, Ruben ran to the window and lifted it open, so quick and hard that it shattered, sending glass everywhere. The room turned cold instantly. He breathed a much needed gulp of air that chilled his lungs on contact.

A thunk.

The door had been opened.

Footsteps.

Ruben took hold of Courtney's elbow and shoved her under the bed. He was about to grab the bullets anyway, just in case, but thought better of it. He slid under the bed just as the two men entered the room.

"Where the fuck is he?"

"Dumbshit. He climbed out the window and down the fire-escape."

"If you had two guys lighting your ass up you'd be moving pretty fast, too."

Thankfully, Courtney was still and silent. It would have been difficult for Ruben to cover her mouth with his hand to keep her from making any sound. He had ended up laying on his back while she lay half on her side, half on her stomach, her head on his thigh, her legs next to his arm. He was also thankful for the bed, or rather, how high its box spring was from the floor. It gave him enough room to risk lifting his head a couple of inches. He did so, seeing Courtney's eyes still in their sockets and fixed upon the two pairs of legs shifting about the room.

The bed's height was also a disadvantage. It meant that Ruben and Courtney could be seen from certain angles and distances like either the bathroom or the bedroom doorway. The former seemed to be where one of the pairs of legs was walking. The legs stopped, turned, sprung, and landed in front of the bathroom. Then they walked in. After a couple of seconds they walked back out, stopping in the doorway.

"He's not here."

"What the fuck are you looking in there for?"

"He might have been hiding."

"The fuck's long gone."

"Maybe we should wait for him. Stake out the place til he shows up again."

Ruben wondered how long he could keep still, and more importantly, how long Courtney could.

"He ain't coming back. Not without backup."

"Thought you said he's a loner."

"A loner with friends."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Neither does this."

Ruben held his breath. Until now, he had been concentrating on the legs in the bathroom doorway, hoping his elbow was not protruding as far as he thought it was. But the last words had come from the other side of the bed, where the second pair of legs was bending. There was nothing he could do. He and Courtney had been discovered. He had failed to protect

her. He was about to tell her how sorry he was when he was cut off.

"Bushmills."

"Huh?" asked the voice from the doorway.

"What's a spic doing drinking Bushmills? I thought they drank that Bacardi shit."

Laughing.

Ruben began breathing again. He had seen a hand come down and pick up the bottle of whiskey he and Courtney had shared and discarded earlier, wanting to save some for later, to celebrate with.

He heard what sounded like a cap being unscrewed and someone taking a swig. Good. You can have it. Now go.

"Let me get some."

The legs in the bathroom doorway came forward a few steps closer to the bed and stopped. There was a swish and a low thunk, prompting Ruben to guess the bottle had been tossed and caught. The sound of a swig being taken followed.

With the lack of any obvious means of doing anything about the situation, Ruben's mind was overloaded with questions. Who were these guys? He had never seen them before, but their behavior and comments marked them as hitmen. Hitmen with confidence or stupidity. Why were they even hanging around? Someone had to have heard the shots and called 911. Even in this neighborhood, it wouldn't be long before the cops showed up. So who hired them? And why? Did tonight's deal have anything to do with this? When Garduno insisted he not be present, Ruben had agreed. He had figured Garduno simply didn't trust him. Who could blame him? Stories of Ruben's youth as a hothead still followed him in some circles. But Ruben didn't trust Garduno either. That's why Tommy and Junior were sitting at Miller's, keeping an eye on Garduno's men while protecting Courtney from a distance. But Courtney wasn't at Miller's yet. So why take me out before you get the pictures? Maybe his boys had jumped the gun, reasoned Ruben.

It was too much. Confusion was setting in, along with the anxiety he already felt. His head was beginning to hurt. He decided to focus on the objects around him in order to keep his adrenaline from getting the best of him. He studied the empty beer can to his right. He studied the bulge in the bottom of the box spring. He studied the run in Courtney's pantyhose. Then he heard his pants unzip.

"What was that?" asked the somewhat high voice.

Ruben felt fingers parting the slit in his boxers.

"What was that?"

Bewildered, Ruben put a hand over his mouth, trying to keep from shouting at Courtney. He guessed what she was up to. Her motivation

was another matter.

"Never mind. Let's just get outta here."

Ruben had now officially seen and done it all. Courtney's probing lips and tongue, despite the presence of two hitmen intent on killing him, were successfully coaxing Ruben's penis. Whether it was the intensity of the predicament or the plain fact that he was a man did not matter to him. This felt good. And if this was the last thing he experienced before dying, well, he couldn't think of a better way to go.

"We gotta stick around for a little while longer."

"What for?"

Ruben had forgotten about the hitmen and the photos and Garduno and everything else. He was in the realm of pure feeling now, intense, painful, hard, mesmerizing. And unquestioningly, he accepted it.

"For this."

Ruben was again looking at the bulge in the box spring when he felt the explosion.

And then a thunk.

Courtney screamed.

Ruben turned his head and saw one of the hitmen on the floor. The hitman was staring at him, aiming his pistol.

Ruben pushed himself away from Courtney and towards the hitman in hopes of making up for this entire mess by shielding her from the impending bullets. But he noticed the hitman was not aiming at all. A red stain was growing rapidly on his shirt. The explosion Ruben had heard was real. Now one hitman lay dead, apparently double crossed, while the other...?

Ruben heard a noise from behind. He turned and saw the other hitman very much alive and very much aiming at him. Ruben's instincts kicked in. He quickly stood, picking his side of the bed up. The he pushed it towards the hitman, who fired his pistol. The mattress didn't stop the bullet like Ruben had hoped, but it did throw off the hitman's aim. The bullet whizzed past Ruben's leg.

He grabbed Courtney and threw her against the window sill. Prying the pistol from the dead hitman's hand, he aimed at the upended bed and fired. He fired again. And again. And again, until he heard a click whimper from the pistol. He nervously moved the box spring and mattress aside to find the hitman huddled against the dresser, his hands on his stomach, preventing his insides from spilling out, his pistol at his feet.

Ruben traded pistols, breathing hard. He looked the hitman over, praying he would live, hoping he would die. Then he turned and aimed the pistol at Courtney. She screamed, "No!"

"Shut up."

She did so, a look of bewilderment on her face.

Ruben shook his head. "You're one cold bitch."

"What?" she asked, standing and walking towards him.

"Sit down."

She kept walking.

"Sit down!"

She stopped, shaking now, and sat on the floor.

"You're scaring me, Ruben."

Ruben went to the box spring and ripped some of the fabric apart. He reached inside and pulled out a large leather bag. Courtney's eyes widened at its sight. He opened the bag, turned it upside down, and let its contents fall on the floor in front of her. She looked at the pile of money, her face struggling with a number of expressions.

"You...you knew?"

"Not until I came."

Courtney wiped her mouth with a trembling hand and uttered, "I called Garduno's guys last week and switched the deal to yesterday."

Ruben looked at the manila folder next to her purse.

"Full of blank paper," Courtney admitted.

He looked at the bullets on the dresser.

"When you went to the bathroom." Another admittance.

"Who else?"

"No one. Are you kidding? I couldn't get any of the guys to turn on you. I knew better. I told them you were gonna sit this one out. Those guys love you. That's why I had to...that's why these two bums."

Ruben listened to her words and tried to understand what had happened, but the barrage of questions hammering away inside of him were too staggering to face. Not while he had to concentrate on breathing, on trying to keep from falling, on trying to keep from tearing apart this woman who had sustained him. There was only one thing he could do.

Ruben managed to walk over to her. He bent down and whispered, "You should've written that note a little neater." He kissed her head tasting the redness of her hair.

"Ruben, I ..."

He held up an arm, dismissing her pathetic attempt at...at what? Explanation? Apology? What could she possibly say?

On the way down the stairs he stumbled twice, but only once did he falter on his intent to ignore the questions looming on the borders of his mind. He only wondered how much it would have hurt if he had been shot. He was certain, however, there were things that hurt worse.

When he exited the building, he was not surprised to find no crowd, no cops. And he was definitely not surprised when, three blocks later, on his way to the subway, he was asked by a teenager if he wanted anything. He answered, "Yes." But he did not know what.

Vanity

Pacific State
University Library

Lady in Waiting

Michelle Woodson

they never told me I'd go blind
that sort of thing isn't mentioned
to baby women
I should learn Braille
just in case/you hadn't noticed
and you hadn't
you've divided me by zero
unde/find me
waiting on this rock
starving myself in cycles
listening for wind
and other myths

I refuse your English
and veggie burgers
you can no longer amaze me
with music
or gravity shoes
save the stale bread
for the ducks
give me digit eyes
and light years
calculate
the shortest distance
between your last breath
and my surface
in/tension

what I'm saying/is exactly
what I'm saying
it's my hair that's changing everything
don't listen to its
logarithmic twists
reaching for you like
spring in February
or some pink tree afro
budding snakes
begging apples

Digitized by the Internet Archive
University Library

Wanton
Mike Rios

Renee 2
Charlie Parker

Nude
Amber Powell

The Screamer 1
Michelle Shulte

Reality

Elaine A. Hakala

Sometimes it's just hard to get that first word out, even when you know you have to say it.

But he knew without me telling him. He knew the moment he got here, the moment he looked at me when he sauntered through the gate at the airport with that boyish grin on his face. I saw the awareness of it in his eyes when he hugged me tightly and kissed me in greeting. I felt it in his touch when we crawled into my bed a while later, despite the passion we always share.

Or maybe I was just feeling my own guilt.

I watched his face across the breakfast table the next morning, his hair still kind of rumpled from sleeping as he sat drinking coffee from my old tabby cat mug and skimming through the paper. I wanted to reach out and straighten those unruly locks for him-they made him look so young—but I busied myself with my own coffee instead, trying to get up the nerve to unburden my soul. Unfortunately it proved harder than I imagined it would over the two weeks since I'd made the decision to tell him. It's just one of those tragic paradoxes of life—when you know someone deserves to hear the truth, but you're also very aware that the truth will hurt him. And I never wanted to hurt Cody. He'd been wonderful to me in the year since we met on vacation.

Unable to face it quite yet, my eyes drifted down to my hands around my own warm cup, to that whitish scar upon my left ring finger that always catches my eye. Three years later that faint groove was still there, marking the spot where my second set of wedding rings rested for the stereotypical seven years. I never realized how tightly they bound my flesh until I took them off, just like the first set I wore before them. The act of removing the last set had been a painful and wonderful experience, in itself hell, as they both were, but I lived through them because I knew with certainty that the relationships were over both times, and that I had tried everything I could to make them work. I knew what I really wanted in each instance... and it wasn't them. This situation wasn't nearly that cut and dried.

His voice tickled across my awareness, almost making me flinch guiltily for the thoughts that raced through my mind. "So did you have some plans for us today?" he asked, just a hint of mischeviousness in his eyes as he folded the newspaper and dropped it beside his plate to capture my gaze with his own, "or can I just take you back to bed and have my way with you all day?"

I giggled, an automatic response to his words, to his voice that always

drops an octave deeper when he says sexy things like that to me. He just grinned lazily and reached across the table, bunching one hand in front of my tee-shirt to drag me to him like he always did, a gesture that usually made me melt.

But not that day.

Suddenly I knew that I couldn't let him distract me anymore from what I had to tell him, despite how pleasant the distraction would be. I was already suffering with sharp pangs of remorse for letting him travel a thousand miles to see me without telling him the truth before he came all this way...heaped with additional guilt for not telling him the moment he got off the plane. But it wouldn't have been right to tell him over a cold and impersonal phone line. And telling him as soon as he arrived? That wasn't even a thought that crossed my mind as I met him halfway up the ramp the night before to throw myself into his arms. I guess I'm selfish. I enjoy the feel of being wrapped securely in that nice warm hug of his. Maybe I just wanted to relish that sensation one more time before I had to throw it away for good.

He looked at me funny when I didn't move from my seat at the table, when I wrapped my fingers around his and took his hand to my lap to prop it against my bare thighs instead. Swallowing hard and trying to stop the nervous fluttering of my stomach, I scrambled for that all important first sentence. I'd rehearsed a few dozen of them in my head already, but now faced with that final critical moment—with him so close to me—I couldn't remember a one of them. But sitting there together in that stream of morning light in my kitchen, the difference in our ages hit home with me one more time, making me sigh softly and squirm in my seat under his inquisitive gaze. There have been times since I met him that those twelve years between us felt like only twelve days, but today I felt the weight of every one of them on my shoulders. The difference in our experiences made them so palpable. I've been through this before. I've dealt with relationships ending. But I know his past. He's still hurt from his last girlfriend..the one who was also his first real one...the one who broke his heart. And here I was going to hurt him again. All I could feel was miserable, because he really didn't deserve what I had to tell him.

I tried from the beginning to make sure this didn't happen...tried to tell him honestly and openly that I was not someone he should get attached to because there were miles between us in more than just the chronological sense. I tried to make him know that ours was a wonderful friendship, but that THAT was all it was. But it evolved into more than that over the year we'd spent visiting each other, talking on the phone for hours between the long trips we both made. I was partially to blame for that...I know. I should have broken it off when he first started telling me that he loved me.

But I didn't. I told him that I loved him, too. It's probably the worst mistake I made with him.

But in many ways, I do love him, adore him in fact. He's so wild and free. I'm just not 'in love' with him. One of those subtle differences that makes life so complicated...a subtlety that, despite my attempts to explain it to him, never sunk in. The look on his face as he sat across the table from me at that moment told me that. Perhaps he thought if he gave me enough time I would change my mind. But time was not on his side in this one. Time and distance were his own worst enemies.

"You look like you have something you want to say, Annie," he told me, his strong fingers wrapping themselves around mine, his voice bringing my dark eyes up to meet his lighter ones.

I didn't even try to hide the feelings on my face. It would have been a futile waste of strength anyway. I emote as much emotion as I absorb from those around me. He knows that. "I do, Cody," I began, then faltered, not knowing where to go from there. I tried to calm myself, but my next words sounded like a sigh. "I'm just not sure how to start, Babe."

I realized vaguely that a spring cloud must have drifted across the morning sun outside, graying the shaft of light flowing in through the open curtains, for when he sat back, removing his hand from mine and looking at me intently, the planes of his face drifted into soft shadows that didn't hide the look of nervousness he was wearing. My heart went out to him as he replied, the tension more than obvious in his tone. "Start at the beginning, Annie."

Start at the beginning. A simple enough request that forced me to grab hold of my emotions with both hands. It was either that or start crying right then. "Cody," I began, taking a deep breath that shuddered right back out of me before I could manage to get any further. Drawing another ragged breath, I tried again. "Cody, you know when we first met I told you that we were destined to be great friends."

The expression that came to his face at that moment made my own emotions threaten to strangle me. He looked for all the world like I had just kicked him. He knew what was coming. Tears started pooling in the corners of my eyes as I fought to go on, but I just didn't know what I could say to soften the blow. "Cody, I never wanted to hurt you," is all I could manage to choke out.

"Who is he, Annie?" he asked me softly, leaning forward in the chair and taking my hand again.

The dampness I saw growing in his blue eyes made me lose it, one lone tear trickling down each of my cheeks, making dual tracks on my anguished face. I closed my eyes and swallowed miserably for a moment to steel myself before reopening them and meeting his gaze directly. I'd never

lied to him, and I didn't plan to start then. "His name is Rick. I met him a few months ago...right after your last visit. He lives here in town."

He just looked down at our clasped hands for the longest time after that, while I fought to keep from breaking into sobs. It felt like I was ripping my own heart out right along with his. When he finally looked back up at me, his face was so rigid with forced control that I just wanted to hide. "What can I do, Annie?" he asked solemnly. "I don't want to lose you."

"Oh, Cody," I sighed dismally, reaching out to straighten those wayward curls on his head, fingertips sliding against his face as well as if trying to stroke the hurt away. "There's nothing you can do, Babe. I love you. You know that, don't you? But you never had me, Cody. Not really. And I think you know that, too...deep inside. I always hoped you'd understand that. We're the best of friends, but we were just never meant to be forever. We're just too different, you and I."

"Stop letting the age thing RULE you, Annie!" he all but growled, surprising me with the anger in his tone. He'd never been anything but calm with me in all the time we'd been together, despite the stories he told of his quick temper. I suppose he needed the anger at that moment to keep himself strong. "So what if you're a young thirty-eight and I'm an old twenty-six?" he continued pointedly. "What difference does it make? I love you."

"Oh, Babe...I know," I returned, my trembling fingers going to his lips to silence him for a moment, finding them trembling as well. "But we want such different things. You want that American Dream...a house with a white picket fence and a couple of kids. And you deserve to have what you want, Cody. You'll be wonderful at it, too," I added, trying to smile at him despite the tears running down my cheeks. "Me, on the other hand?? I've been there...done that and I'm ready for a change."

"I want YOU, Annie...period...whatever that means," he snapped right back, trapping my hand and putting my palm against his cheek as he leaned forward ever more, his eyes blazing and making me want to cry even harder. "I don't care how our lives work out as long as we're together."

"But we're NOT together, Cody." I knew that I should stop there, but he'd opened the issue. I had to tell him how I felt. "I see you every few months for a couple of days. And we have great fun when we do, but I'm afraid that if we were together all the time, we'd just get on each other's nerves."

"We could change that. We could move in together," he countered, his expression growing more stubborn by the second. "And you don't get on my nerves at all, Annie."

This was going badly. How do you tell someone that, as much as you

care for him, you know you'd end up ruling him in the long run, controlling him completely? How do you tell someone you care about that you could never really respect him for that simple reason? And how do you tell someone nicely that he just doesn't have the drive and maturity that you need in a lifemate? Or that, while he was loving you from a distance, you found someone else close by who had those qualities that you needed so desperately? How do you express that in words without sounding like a total bitch? At that moment, I didn't have a clue. But I had to say something. "I would in the long run, Cody. I'm not easy to live with. And there are so many factors at play here, Babe. The fact that you're only eight years older than my daughter is just one of them. What about your family? You're an only child. What is your nice Catholic mother...the one who's only ten years older that ME...going to say about you settling down with a twice divorced woman...one who has no interest in producing the only grandchildren she'll ever see? You already tell me how she pressures you all the time to find a 'nice' girl and settle down to making her some grandbabies. I think she's talking about someone your own age."

"She'll get over it," he grumbled in return, rising to grab the coffee pot and refill both our cups. I watched the slump of his shoulders dismally, knowing that it was going to get worse with him before it got better. When he returned to his chair, he stared at me for what seemed like forever before he spoke again, his tone so sad it nearly broke my heart.

"Is he good to you, Annie?"

I closed my eyes and took a calming breath before answering him, knowing that I was not going to say what he wanted to hear. "Yes, Cody. He is."

"Tell me about him," he said. I know it was the hardest thing he ever did in my presence from the pain in his eyes when he spoke. But I also knew what he was doing. He was hoping beyond hope to find a flaw in my description of the man I had met, something he could capitalize on.

But I was unable to give it to him. "He's forty-three, Babe...owns his own business, makes me laugh...and he doesn't let me control him." There. I'd said it. I'd voiced the true underlying problem in my relationship with Cody. It wasn't so much about age or distance...it was about who shouldered the power and responsibility in the relationship. It was about how I had been the one who had to take charge of all those boring and stressful life decisions in my previous relationships, because both times I married men who were dreamers, artists, creative souls...just like him. Someone had to make sure that we had money, that bills were paid, that the nuts and bolts of life were tightened properly. Despite the dream of a 50/50 relationship, that power always seemed to become very unequal after a while, because, after all, there is the Golden Rule to consider. She who

has the gold...makes the rules. And I'd always had the gold in all my relationships. I was always the driven one. My two husbands were never capable of keeping their own lives together, forcing me to do it for both of us. Cody wasn't capable of it either.

"I don't let you control me, Annie," he chuckled, kissing my hand and relaxing in his chair, a relieved look on his face. "So I don't see that as a problem."

I had to smile. He was such a sweet and wonderful man-so talented, and yet so damned naive to the ways of the world. "Cody? How many payments did you tell me that you're behind on your motorcycle?"

His face clouded instantly, tension returning to his countenance with that single question. "Only one...well, actually more like one and a half. I'll catch it up," he added defensively.

"But you spent how much for a plane ticket to come here?" I returned, standing and striding back and forth in front of him. He didn't answer my question, just squirmed a bit in his chair, looking sheepish. "How's the new guitar working out, by the way?" I went on.

"It's sooo sweet," he responded enthusiastically, that light bouncing back into his eyes instantly when I mentioned the new Les Paul he'd just bought. He'd talked about it for weeks before he bought it. "I haven't gotten it yet," he continued in an animated tone, "because they're still adjusting the..." His voice trailed off when I stopped pacing and looked at him with one eyebrow cocked, as he realized that was something else he had spent money on that he didn't have instead of taking care of his responsibilities first. "Money isn't the only thing a relationship is based on, Annie," he added defensively, trying to meet my gaze resolutely, but losing the battle and lowering his eyes again.

"No, Cody. It isn't," I agreed. "Tell me about Patricia."

His eyes shot instantly to mine, his mouth dropping open in shock. "Annie...I...umm...I...she doesn't mean..." he began.

But I silenced him with a grin and a sweep of my hand. "Don't look so surprised, Cody. Just because you live a thousand miles away doesn't mean I don't hear things." I strolled behind him, wrapping my arms around his neck and planting a soft kiss on his ear, my breath stirring the curls there as I went on. "It's just another reason, Babe. One of many. You say you want a commitment, but you don't live like you do."

"Annie, damnit..."

"No, Cody," I chuckled, hugging him and feeling him wiggle uncomfortably. "Don't even try to make an excuse. You've had another woman in your bed for the last month,yet you suddenly don't want to lose ME? I'm not interested in games, Babe. I told you that the first day we met."

"You're one to talk," he grumbled, sliding his hands up my arms that

encircled him, a soft sigh escaping his lips. "You've got me here sleeping in your bed while this Rick person is pining after you."

"He knows you're here, Babe," I returned casually, kissing his cheek and then smiling at him when he turned his head to look at me strangely. "He told me that he wanted me to have this last weekend with you before he and I moved forward. He understands that I care for you. It's not a source of jealousy with him. He knows my relationship with him is very different from my relationship with you."

I could see him fighting with that concept as I released him and moved to stand in front of him, my fingers trailing across his back, his shoulders, his cheek as I went. Those deep blue eyes of his, that hint of a beard shadow on his chin, that boyish shock of hair draping his forehead all made me smile. Oh, to be that young again-to have the freedom to just be who you were and to not care what tomorrow brings. I'd tried to recapture that in myself through being with Cody, that chance to feel free again. But it didn't work. Reality had a way of creeping into it every time.

Funny how I found that freedom in a place I'd never thought to look. For the first time in my life I found it in a man who didn't dash about all the time expressing his own freedom, but rather strove to lift the burden of the world from my shoulders, to allow me the space to be free for a change, taking joy in my art, my words, my expression as if they were of his own creation. And maybe in a sense they were.

And Cody? Sweet Cody. I took him back to bed as the morning light played across my kitchen floor, held out a hand, tangled my fingers in his, gave him a sultry look, and made him dance the dance I wanted him to dance. I controlled him for one last time. We spent the day and then the night with our limbs intertwined under the thick comforter on my bed, making sad but sweet love, few words, just touch, just closeness. There were tears in both our eyes as we parted the next day at the airport, but we both knew it must be, no matter how painful it was.

The phone was ringing as I walked back in my door, feeling as blue as I had ever felt in my life. Dropping the keys, I reached for the handset, and a deep voice flowed across my ear before I could say a word. "Don't speak, Sugar. Hear me out for a moment. I don't know how your weekend went. You don't even have to tell me what happened, if you don't want to. I know it was sad for you, but I'm glad you two had the chance to talk face-to-face. He's a better person for having known you, Annie. You know that. You give so much to the people around you," he murmured, the sound of his voice bringing his face before my vision—dark eyes with little sun crinkles around them when he smiled, dark hair streaked with the beginnings of a touch of grey. Not so young, but with a twinkle in his eye that spoke of intelligence seasoned with a spark of mischeviousness, and a

double dose of humor I'd grown to love already. "It's why he loves you," he went on. "You've made him see life as he never had before. But you deserve so much more for YOU, Annie. You deserve your chance to find out what you can be for a change. That's what I want for you, Sugar. But for right now...I'll bet you could really use a hug."

It made me smile through the last traces of tears on my face. I only had one reply. "So how long will it take you to get over here, handsome?"

It made him chuckle, and I heard the scrape of his keys on the table beside him through the crackle of static on the phone line. "On my way right now," he said. I grinned and returned the phone to its cradle when I heard the hurried click on the other line, turning and taking a seat at my table to await his arrival in the shaft of sunlight that illuminated my kitchen.

A Statue Among Men

Clinton Carey

He stands alone in a crowded park.
Passersby talking around him—never to him.
The occasional old friend stops by to rest—weary from traveling so far, so fast, staying only a moment then flying away with the first strong wind.
He has stories to tell but no one to listen.
Captivated by his strength, I stop for a moment to rest.
He begins to speak to me but I can not hear him.
Then with a tired nod of my head his voice is clear; I am filled with his tales: the horrible winters where unprotected lives were lost to the elements wars for a freedom that was his from birth
the illnesses unaffected by modern medicine
Not all of his tales are sad; he speaks of bright spring days filled with the laughter of happy children running and playing in the beautiful parks, the distinguished sound of horses pounding the soft dirt roads, the leaves on theplentiful trees whispering and crackling in the cool autumn breeze.
Then with a jostle I am back in the park.
People still walking right by, never taking the time to stop and listen to the tales of my new friend's life.
Maybe tomorrow I will come back to sit here again, to listen, to visit.
Until I return—here he will stand, no one to talk to, no one to listen—
A statue among men.

Quatervois

Shawna Silverman

I.
You and I are veterans of the same dim campaign
with five years of wasted breath
coalescing between us like swampgas
and all my useless useless tears
won't water your bones
you beautiful fool dulled by despair
and the slow winding death of five years

II.
Who's to say which one of us is more wrong?
A bundle of twigs
in a moment's breath
is alive with flame
while the somber trunk may rot silently
from within

III.
Yeah, I'm takin' what I can get.
The angel spark in your brute chest sustains me.
The ashes of a thousand suns grace my boot-tops;
the fruit of last night's dreams
runs down my dusty chin.

IV.
In the shapes between the heavens and the sea
your hand in mine reflects
the straining skeleton of a china moth,
wings wrapped mercifully around my thumb.
All the little lives and deaths
emerge beneath the waves;
we jerk and toss
and then grow young.

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University Library

#72

John D. Trainor

This isn't living,
fighting for my four corners,
walls that separate me from my neighbor,
my privacy through tracing paper...
Everyone listening to where I'm walking,
what I'm cooking,
my music that's wailing,
the secrets I'm saying,
the trust I'm sharing
for anyone that wants to get a leg up on me,
but maybe if I save my money,
begging for bills in front of a grill
that Don Sam wants to keep for protection,
wants me to call him my Uncle
so we can keep the connection,
(I call it taxes, but he says it's freedom)
pointing his finger, while his attitude lingers
on my shoulders like boulders,
as I hear Don Sam call for another soldier
and he hides beneath a three-colored flag,
standing in my backyard decked out in drag,
shouting, "Protect the women and children!
Prepare so that no harm will come to them!"
and out of sight is the silver spoon
shoved in the mouth of some Kennedy loon
who dances with Pope John and the Harlequin Nun
on my back so that their will may be done.

University Library

Self Portrait as Lydia
Jennifer L. Cohen

Jack of Hearts

Patrick Godley

The sun had long since set itself down for a cool dip in the Pacific when the stranger walked in. A seemingly impenetrable silence had filled the bar when the whispers of this night's wager crept into everyone's ears. Jim felt as if he had called out the devil. He had thought to himself, "I'd give anything to win this hand," just as he had done so many times before. But tonight he felt strange. He had only felt this way once before. As he dropped his fifth card to the table, the silence was broken as a spur jingled. At the time, his concentration was so heavy on the game that he did not ponder why a man would be wearing spurs. A few men still rode on horseback in the city, but spurs were not necessary when riding in a city of San Francisco's size. Jim's mind was on the game. Reaching for the top card off the deck, another spur jangled. Jim closed his eyes and, as he slid the card across the table to meet with the rest, he heard the hinges cry as the stranger entered unseen. Everyone heard him come into the bar, but the sound he made did not evoke interest, merely annoyance. It detracted from the final poker hand of the night.

Every night for as long as anyone in the bar could remember, Jim, the wealthiest man in the state, would get drunk and gamble, but never past midnight. Many years earlier, so long ago that many began to wonder if the tale was even true, Jim was said to have gambled his wife away. In truth, she was not yet his wife. They had been courting for some time when Jim ran into some money. They took a train ride across the bay to a casino outside the county. Jim gambled long into the night, so long that they nearly missed the train ride home. When they got to the station, the train was so full and the conductor would not let the two on board. Jim knew that if he did not get his fiancé home, her reputation would be ruined. Women in polite society did not spend the night out with a man unescorted. Jim's worries were not entirely unselfish, though. Even though his intent was marriage, he could not even imagine what her father would do to him. So Jim paid the conductor fifty dollars to turn the train around to come back to get them.

They went back to the casino and Jim kept on gambling. Some time after midnight, the conductor came into the casino to get the two and take them home. The train backed out of the station. They could have turned it around, but Jim was in a hurry since he was already late in getting his fiancé home. The train was on a set track so no one figured it would matter if it ran backwards. The conductor had not informed the bridge operator

that he was running the train after midnight in fear that he might lose his job.

A light fog had set in on the bay. Jim sat back with his fiancé in the only car the train was pushing. The conductor figured that with just one car attached to the engine, he would not burn enough fuel to be noticed. The cool fog dampened the air as the train picked up speed. A small ship entered the bay and approached the bridge. The bridge operator pulled the gear and spun the bridge to let the boat through. He was not expecting a train to be on the tracks and since the train was running in reverse, he could not see the light on the front of the locomotive. Slightly nervous of the time, Jim was watching the track and noticed the bridge spinning to let the boat through. He called the conductor to stop the train. Without panic, yet full of fear, the conductor pulled the brake. Sparks flew as the wheels stopped and the train's momentum sent it sliding along the track. They had reached too great a speed to stop the train in such a short distance. The conductor braced himself. He watched the passenger car drop out of sight and then pop back into view as he too went over the edge. It was like a roller coaster to Hell. The passenger car hit the water and before it had time to sink, the engine came crashing down on top of it. The conductor was crushed between the two cars. Jim and his fiancé were tossed to one end of the car and then back again. Water soon filled all of the space around them. When the locomotive's engine smashed into the passenger car, it shot a piece of the window framing, spearing Jim's right bicep and severing the nerve. His arm hung dead in the water. He managed to pull his fiancé to the surface, but with only one arm working, he could not drag her to the shore. She drowned that night in the bay.

The doctors amputated Jim's right arm in fear of gangrene. Though the two never married, tormented by guilt, Jim wore his wedding ring. And vowed he would lose his other arm before he lost that ring. And he never did lose that ring. He never lost another thing. He could gamble away all the money he had and if the sap he was playing would give him one more hand, Jim would win it all back.

The poker games never really got interesting until Jim lost all of his money. But some nights he would never get that deep in the hole. And Jim always gave odds; usually, it was Jim's hundred to the other man's dollar. Jim would drink and gamble all night but no matter how much or how little he won or how drunk he got, Jim would never play past midnight. Most nights the final bet would be double-or-nothing or for a few of Jim's stallions. One night he bet his house. Some of the time men would play Jim the final hand for that contraption called an automobile. The damned thing hardly ever worked and when it did, it left such a cloud of smoke behind that it could easily be confused with a burning barn. They

had no use for the car, they just wanted the bragging rights. But this night the wager was of particular interest.

A cocky Irishman by the name of Begby had won all of Jim's money. He had heard of the one-armed man who would lose all of his money, only to win it right back. Begby had plenty of money and a house of his own. He cared not for the breeding horses or for the automobile. He came that night to show Jim up. Begby was set on putting an end to the legend. In a drunken stupor, Jim had lost all of the money he had locked up in the bank next door to the Hyacinth House Saloon. Begby bet all of the money he brought to the table and all of the money he had won from Jim against Jim's wedding ring. Jim accepted and, being a man true to his word, knew that losing the hand meant losing his arm.

Jim lifted the cards to his face and opened his eyes to see the unthinkable. He had been dealt the Ace, King, Queen, and Ten of Hearts, and the Jack of Spades. Barely conscious from the bottle and the hour, Jim had tossed away a Royal Straight in hopes of drawing together the toughest hand in poker: a Royal Flush. And he drew the Jack of Hearts. He dropped the cards on the table and a rally cheer filled the bar. But as Jim swung his arm around like a hook to drag in all of his reclaimed chips, a gunshot rang out.

Begby called Jim a cheat and struck him across the face with the back of his hand. Jim hit the floor. The blow wasn't that strong, but gravity was enough of a reason for the drunken Jim to go down. Angered by the Irishman's accusation (and this being a western), a bar fight broke out. The Irishman was grossly outnumbered, but he did have sobriety to his advantage. The stranger who had just walked in helped him to fight off the mob. The two kept firing their guns into the ceiling. It had no effect in scaring the attackers, but, as everyone later found out, that was not the purpose. The two men fought their way to the door. As they stepped over him, Jim now noticed that both men were wearing spurs. Jim heard one more loud shot. He then passed out.

Jim awoke soon after dawn. As he tried to stand, he found the effects of the alcohol were all too present. The bar was in a shambles. The ceiling and back wall were riddled with bullet holes. Two men were dead. The bartender was not to be seen. Most of the men from the night before had gone home. Some, like Jim, had passed out on the floor and were still lying there. Jim wandered into the street. There were shards of wood in the road. One of the deputies was shot and lay dead in the street. Jim's horse had been stolen. All of the horses were gone. Jim stared at the sign above the saloon: Hyacinth House. The sun was now at Jim's side. His shadow ran down the street and seemed to reach all the way to the ocean. The town was still and silent. A breeze blew by Jim's face. He thought

that he smelled wheat. "Could this breeze have come from as far as the wheat fields? Why not further? Could this breeze have come from the Atlantic? Could it have crossed the entire continent? Was there a hint of the Deep South? Could this wind have crossed the Mississippi? And the plains of the Midwest? Could it have climbed the Rockies and jumped the Grand Canyon? And all for me?"

Jim heard a whisper that snapped him out of his trance. He looked for the origin of the sound. The wind had kicked a dollar bill to Jim's feet. He did not pick it up. His mind raced. This was bad. To anyone else, finding money in the street would be lucky. But it was out of the ordinary. And it was too much, a penny, a nickel, a dime at the most, but a whole dollar? Jim recalled the night before. He had drunk heavily. He had gambled and lost all of his money. He had won it all back. They had played with chips and not cash. All of his money was safe and locked up in the bank next door to the saloon. But Jim had that odd feeling. He had felt it only once before, the night his fiancé drowned.

Jim tried to recall the rest of the night. He had been called a cheat and then a fight broke out. He was either knocked out or had passed out. There had been gunshots. One, the last one he heard, had been exceptionally loud. The bank. Jim turned to see the bank's front window was blown out and the door was hanging on one hinge. He ran inside. The bank manager, Mr. Minor, was dead. He had been shot in the stomach and bled to death during the night. The door to the safe was open and the safe was empty. A hole had been drilled next to the lock and a stick of dynamite was inserted to blow the lock open. The Irish gambler was a setup. Everybody got so wrapped up in the game that no one noticed what was happening next door. The stranger must have walked in to signal the Irishman that the safe was ready to be blown. So they started a bar fight to mask the noise in the bank. That last loud gunshot Jim had heard wasn't a gunshot. That was the dynamite that blew the safe. All of the horses had been set loose to slow down anyone who might try to chase the thieves.

How long had they been gone? Jim reached for his pocket watch. It was not there. His billfold was gone too! He had been robbed of all he had. They had stolen all of his money out of the bank and picked him clean. His heart stopped. His wedding ring, the only possession he truly valued. It was still there. That they had not taken from him. He stepped outside, into the street once again. He now noticed the shards of wood on the ground. They had made up the paneling in the front window of the bank. The blast from the safe door must have knocked out the window. Jim stood in the street, this time facing the sun. He did not need to squint. It was a gentle light. The town was still quiet. Jim bent down and picked up the dollar off the ground. The wind blew again and Jim's breeze was carried to the ocean.

The Tree of Life
Alison Broome

Silent Mantra

Elaine A. Hakala

All she could do was stare when the question was finally asked.

It wasn't as if she hadn't tried to steel herself against the eventuality of it. She spent hours and hours over the preceding two weeks preparing to be able to utter the word "Yes" when asked. But when that question finally came, uttered by the nurse in the impossibly white uniform standing beside her in the brightly lit corridor, it was as if the entire world suddenly pressed down upon her chest, making it impossible to draw a breath to answer.

And the nurse was no comfort to her in her moment of panic, staring back at her with cold, doll black eyes, her long lacquered nails tapping impatiently against the clipboard held against her lithe form. "Did you hear me, Miss Evans?" The woman asked in a patronizing tone, tipping her arm up to glance at her watch as if she had a hundred other responsibilities more important than asking a dying woman to take a chance with her few weeks left. "I can repeat the question, if you didn't understand," she added, the forced quality of her feigned concern evident in her tone. But when she got no response, her demeanor softened a bit as she slipped one cool hand over the curve of the emaciated arm that lay on the gurney beside the curve of her own white clad hip. "Beth?" she murmured.

Beth closed her eyes and swallowed hard, despite the fact that she had nothing to swallow. Her mouth and throat were sandpaper dry...had been for seemingly endless days since she had made the decision. When she opened her eyes again, the flourescent light behind the nurse's perfectly coifed blonde head gave her an angelic aura, bringing up a chuckle from the depths of Beth's despair as she lay upon the rolling cart that would probably take her to her doom. Her frail frame began to shake with mirth, though no sound came out from between her cracked lips, her mind reeling with amusement at the thought that there might actually be angels after all, despite her years of arguing with her friends at grad school about their improbability. "I might actually find out soon," she thought, the hilarious irony of it blocking out the infinite sadness for a precious moment.

The nurse took the silent, shaking emotion for grief, her carefully made up face shifting into what must have been a well-practiced expression of sympathy as she patted Beth's arm consolingly. But the counterfeit concern only made the woman on the bed laugh harder, until her voice finally sounded out in the shiny white corridor like a maniacal croak.

Realizing that her patient was laughing and not in tears, the carefully

starched angel of mercy frosted over once more, a hard edge returning to her eyes as she stuck out the clipboard to Beth, chained pen skidding off into her patient's lap from the abrupt motion. She stood silently as Beth took the pen from the sheet that covered her, one tiny shaking hand rising to scrawl her name on the form clipped to the board presented to her, signing her own death warrant perhaps...only time would tell. The second Beth's hand dropped from completing her signature, the nurse all but snatched the pen from her, turning on her heel and walking away smartly, leaving the dying woman lying alone in the corridor.

Beth watched the woman's retreat, still chuckling as she laid back against the thin pillow and pulled the starched sheet up once more. It felt good to laugh. Laughter had been missing from her life for far too long.

As her fleeting humor drifted away, she fingered the tiny spot of blue ink left behind on the pristine sheet by the pen, thinking back to the day all this had started. That was the day Dr. Jamerson had told her about the cancer. "I won't lie to you," he had said. The hollow feeling that began in her at that moment still remained, echos of the words "bone marrow cancer" still reverberating around inside what had once been her life. They had tried everything they could, months of agonizing treatments that made her so sick she wished she was dead, but conventional medicine had failed her. As the soft sounds of distant conversation and the soft whir of machinery tickled against her ears in the stark white corridor, she ran her hands down her painfully thin body, feeling hard bone and papery skin where once soft, rounded flesh had been, and closed her eyes in misery once more.

That was why Chad had left. He changed almost instantly when she told him the news that day, and as she sobbed against his chest she felt him harden next to her like a stone, distancing himself from her pain. Oh, he stayed for a few months, just for appearances. It wouldn't have done his social standing any good to have left too soon, would have hurt his chances of finding another rich woman to take care of him if the word got out about that. But as the chemicals ravaged her body in an attempt to fight the growth of darkness in her, he grew more and more distant, until one day he was just no longer there. Sometimes at night she still hugged the pillow that held a faint hint of his smell, trying to lose herself in it as the pain kept her awake, to use that wisp of cologne to focus on as she chanted softly to herself, trying to let the mantra wash over her, to take her to the place in her own being that was calm, cool, the escape that she needed. Intellectually, she knew he was no good to start with, that Chad never had the depth of soul she had, that he wanted her physically, that he wanted her money, but could have cared less about the rest of her. But even admitting that, she missed his company, and the feel of his hands. But he no longer

wanted this body...this thirty-two-year-old flesh that looked ninety...no longer young, or lush, or supple to the touch. In the end, even her wealth had not kept him around to suffer through that.

She heard the squeak of rubber soles on the white linoleum, and looked up to see a young male orderly standing at the head of her gurney. His broad, pimpled face was homely, but his sunny smile was genuine as he looked down at her. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," she said softly, her fingers trembling more as he pushed against the rolling table, and he started her on her trip down the hallway. She knotted her hands in the sheet to stop them from shaking, wondering for the thousandth time if she was making the right decision. But for her, there was no choice. It was commit to this, with the horrible risks, or simply wait passively to die.

"Are you afraid?" the orderly asked, and the audacity of that question caused Beth to turn her head and look back at him, preparing to blast him verbally for inquiring about what should be an obvious state. But his soft brown eyes stopped her. He wasn't just being flip. He really was concerned.

"Of course I am," she sighed, relaxing back on the thin mattress as best she could with the grinding ache in her bones. "Wouldn't you be?"

"If I were facing equal chances to be cured but go insane, or to simply die...yes...I would be," he replied, his compassion for her plight evident in his tone. Tears she thought had long since dried up welled in her eyes, and she brought her withered hands up to cover her face, fighting the sob that threatened to escape.

He stopped their movement instantly, coming around to the side of the rolling bed to place one warm hand on her stomach. She tried to ignore him for a moment, but then finally pulled her hands down, her damp eyes meeting his as he stood there beside her, his fear that he had upset her obvious. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"That's okay," she whispered as she sniffed back the emotion that had taken hold of her once more. "It's not your fault."

"You don't have to do this, you know," he added, shifting on his feet uncomfortably.

"Yes, I do," she returned, drawing the sheet up to her chin once more with both hands, trying to hide her soul from his questions with the thin cotton. "I'll be dead in less than a month anyway. No guts, no glory...right?" she added ruefully.

He stepped closer to her, taking one of her hands in his larger one and looking quickly down both ends of the corridor before leaning down to her, pitching his voice low enough so it did not carry down the echoing white hallway to anyone else's ears. "Beth," he whispered, his warm breath

brushing against her cheek as he put his lips almost to her ear, "whatever happens, don't tell them."

As he straightened beside her, she looked up at his face curiously, not understanding his words. "What do you mean?" she asked, but he shushed her quickly and returned to the head of the gurney, starting her on her way once again. Beth craned her head up to look at him strangely, and he winked and grinned at her as the foot of the bed struck the swinging doors at the end of the corridor, taking them into the treatment room.

Dr. Jamerson stood there waiting for her, and beside him the tall form of the Alandrain doctor Meyesus. Beth had not met him before. He was very much in demand, and Dr. Jamerson had thought it best not to tie up his time. She had seen the Alandrains on the telescreen when they had first arrived on Earth, seen the worldwide fervor and near global war that ensued because of it, until the alien creatures had proved themselves benign and united public opinion about themselves by showing the world their potentially precious gifts of better life. But meeting one face to face was much more shocking than she had anticipated. The pre-op shot had relaxed her, and it was probably just as well, for the sight almost made her gasp.

The kids had taken to calling them "Blue Kens" and "Blue Barbies" because of the way they looked...the less flattering versions "Blukees" and "Bluebees" they whispered of course, since almost all of the adult world stood ready to sing praises to them. Only a few people still held out against their acceptance, still cried that they were an evil alien presence on the earth, but most had stars and hope in their eyes after the rapid advancements in science, after the first AIDS victim had been cured, after the first cancer victim had been cured, a euphoria that had continued even after the success rate had proven poor at best with some procedures.

Despite their dusky midnight blue skin and crystal eyes, every one of the 28 Alandrains from the scout ship was beautiful. That was the only way to describe them. Their facial features had been compared to classic Greek sculpture, chiseled into handsome perfection. And they had two arms and two legs, and two eyes with a mouth, all in the right places, making the doomsayers who wrote science fiction stories of horrible looking aliens invading the Earth look rather sheepish. As a matter of fact, all of their features were very similar to the Earthling friends they had found on the blue-green planet their scout ship discovered the year before.

Was it only a year, Beth found herself wondering as her gurney was maneuvered beside a stationary table in the treatment room. So much had changed in that year. The skies were already noticeably cleaner; the air filtration stations that the Alandrians had designed and that whole world had sent labor and money to build at the polar caps were making a major

difference already. Likewise with the water across the planet, genetically engineered bacteria clearing years of pollution away from nearly every body of water in a scant few months. Their altered versions of earth vegetation promised to end world hunger, and so many other things that they were willing to share, so much promise. They brought such knowledge with them.

Her body sang out in pain as the orderly and the nurse who had joined the doctors helped her from the rolling bed to the stationary one. The young man's face pinched just a bit as he saw hers wince, sympathetic pain perhaps, and he patted her hand and half smiled at her for a moment before putting a hip to the gurney once more and taking it back to the corridor. Beth turned her head to watch him as he went past and caught the briefest hint of what might have been a wink before he moved away. He was strange, but rather sweet she decided, wondering what his words to her in the hall had meant.

"Miss Evans?"

She turned back to face Dr. Meyesus, knowing the alien voice to be his. His warm smile as her eyes met his would have melted any iceberg heart, despite the deep indigo tone of the face it radiated from. She knew now why so many people from her world found the visitors so intriguing. "And why not?" her friend Cassandra had said that night that felt so long ago, the last time they had way too many margaritas and talked like magpies far into the night. "They're just like humans...only blue...just another color...like that Sudanese business man that Donna Ross had that affair with last spring...you remember the one??" Cassie had dissolved into giggles at that point in the conversation, like she always did...at least like she did before Beth's illness had cruelly stolen Cass' sense of fun. Now she was too serious in her best friend's presence, too sad, too quick to tears instead of the laughter that always helped Beth escape the fear of her tragic situation. Cass had offered to come with her today, but Beth had gently refused. Lying there awaiting what might be her last breaths, she knew that her tender friend would not have held up under the strain, despite the lure of having the chance to meet one of the charismatic creatures at last, the one who now stood beside the table and slipped one warm hand over her suddenly ice cold one.

Being this close to the Alandrain doctor, Beth could sense the charm of the man despite the one true alien aspect of his appearance...his crystalline eyes. With no pupil, no hint of the direction of the gaze, the Alandrians eyes were cold to look at, not the warm and open windows to the soul that their human counterparts possessed. But the rest of the face was so expressive, so alive, that Beth could not help being drawn into the circle of energy that he radiated. "Yes, Dr. Meyesus," she replied, returning his

smile. "It's wonderful to meet you at last."

"I wish it could be under better circumstances, Beth. May I call you Beth?" he asked, his warm fingers finding the pulse at her wrist almost casually as he smiled down on her. She nodded for him to continue, and his smile almost went up a notch in brilliance, making her marvel that there was once any opposition to the arrival of these dynamic creatures. That smile could light any room.

"Beth, Dr. Jamerson tells me that he's explained the risks in what we're about to do to you, but I want to be sure that you completely understand before we begin," he continued, the barest tips of his fingers stroking across her face to turn it slightly from side to side, his unfixed gaze seeming to scan her eyes as she lay there.

"What is there to understand, Dr. Meyesus?" she returned, a hint of wistful sigh escaping her lips before her weak voice grew stronger with false resolve. Oh, to be able to be anywhere else. "I have a one-third chance of complete recovery, a one-third chance of being cured, but losing my mind, and last but not least, I have a one-third chance of never getting up off this table on my own ever again. Considering the situation I'm in, it's worth the risk to me." She swallowed hard to fight back the tears that rose at the corners of her eyes again, caused by the stark emotion of saying those words and realizing their hard reality for what might be the last time.

The alien man cupped her face in both his hands and looked down upon her for a long span of heartbeats, and Beth suddenly found herself being enveloped in a feeling of such faith in this benevolent creature that she almost dared to hope. They had already worked so many miracles for the planet. Was there one for her? If no one else could, maybe he could save her. It was worth any cost. She'd proven that when she liquidated half her assets to pay for the procedure. It was only money, after all. So far only a scant double handful of wealthy and high ranking individuals in need had been able to afford the cost of the treatment, a cost that the Alandrains had assured the world would become substantially less expensive when the strange looking plants they had sown by the thousands upon the acres and acres of public land were finally grown to maturity. But Beth didn't have the time to wait for the cost to go down. No bargain basement for her. Days and even hours were precious to her now.

"Beth, I'm not going to put you to sleep for this procedure," Dr. Meyesus told her, bringing her back from her own thoughts for a moment to focus on his face and his words as he stroked one thumb casually across her jawline, holding her face in his hands. His soft touch made her shiver just a bit, and marvel at the reaction in herself. It had been so long since a man had touched her, and alien as he may be, he was still a man. She almost pinched herself for the direction her mind was taking as she looked

up at him...silly, girlish thoughts when so much was at stake, when her life hung in the balance. "I need you awake so I can talk to you," he added, his smile bringing one to her face as well, despite the pain, despite the dread. "But I must tell you that it may not be comfortable for you. There will be some pain involved."

"Nothing could be worse than what I've already gone through, Dr. Meyesus," she returned, closing her eyes for a moment to steel herself against the inevitable, starting the chant in her mind that had proven so useful over the long months of chemo. It was a simple trick of self-hypnosis, one she learned as a child from a New Age healer her mother had taken her to for the migraines she still suffered on occasion, a soft mantra chant inside that helped her to let the pain roll off like sheets of rain water, bringing blessed relief.

"Then we shall begin," the Doctor said softly, stroking her hair and then turning from the table. The nurse stepped up to take his place, the faint prick of an IV needle in the back of her hand that followed the woman's arrival nothing compared to the pain that Beth had endured in near silence for the past few months. She watched as the two doctors prepared solutions in a set of hypodermic needles, the long line of syringes gleaming under the florescent lights, and the panic she knew would come started to rise in her soul. She wanted to believe in the Alandrain miracle so badly. Meeting Dr. Meyesus had helped tremendously. His presence was reassuring in some extraodinary way, despite its strangeness. But the finality of it all as the alien doctor turned to her, pale blue essence of the Alandrain plant that had traveled with them over millions of miles of space carefully encased inside the first hypodermic, made her grasp the edges of the table to prevent certain flight.

As he pressed the needle into the hypodermic port on her IV, Beth closed her eyes and turned up the chanting in her head a notch, trying to fight the panic. "This is it, Beth old girl," she thought to herself, "no turning back now." The cool tranquil stream brought forth by the mantra soothed her some, but nothing could hide her from the terror as she opened her eyes again to see his hand poised on the plunger of the syringe.

"Beth," Dr. Meyesus said, pausing for a second to capture her gaze, "this will feel very cold as it goes into your veins. It's important that you keep talking to me during this first step. No matter how hard it gets. Do you understand, Beth?"

She couldn't find a voice to answer him, but nodded her head gravely. Time felt suspended as his thumb depressed the plunger, sending the pale blue fluid into the reservoir to mix with a bit of glucose before descending down the long plastic tubing on its way to roll the dice in her veins. Shifting the mantra in her head higher, she tensed as the first chill fingers of it

hit the back of her hand.

"Relax, Beth," Dr. Meyesus cautioned, one deep blue hand coming to rest upon her shoulder as his sympathetic countenance hovered above her. "Fighting it makes it worse." His other hand slipped warm fingers around her wrist as she felt the first icy shock hit her veins, making her tremble as much from fear as temperature. No turning back now.

Dr. Jamerson had told her that the effects of the drug would be rapid. She had no idea what that meant until that moment. The ice in her veins went white hot in a flash, the surge running straight up her arm to her head like a gunshot. Caught by surprise, she cried out, the cooling mantra lost in the scream that tried to tear itself from her throat.

And then they were all with her, the nurse, Dr. Jamerson, and the Alandrain all laying hands on her, murmering soothing words. It was as if her head were filled with a hive full of buzzing bees for what felt like an eternity and then just nothingness. But vast nothingness. It was almost as if her head had opened up into cathedral size, a sensation that both stunned and elated her. Her mantra came back instantly, almost reverberating with power inside her skull, drawing her mind away from the pain that looked so small in that vast space. A smile came to Beth's lips as her eyes opened to find the faces over hers.

"How do you feel?" Dr. Meyesus asked, withdrawing the hypo from the IV port and replacing it with another one filled and at the ready.

"Amazing," Beth replied, "simply amazing. You should use that stuff instead of morphine, Dr. Jamerson," she added with a giggle.

"That was what we call Trora," the Alandrain physicaian returned, "to ready the mind and body for acceptance of the Renaque that we will use next. It's important to heal the mind as well as the body, you know," he added with a smile. "We tried to take that into consideration as we began using our chemicals on our human friends."

Almost free of pain for the first time in months, Beth felt like dancing. Hell...if they'd let her, she knew she could turn a fancy heel around the treatment room a time or three. She felt strong and free for the first time in what seemed like forever. Her mind soared with the sensation, and the realization hit her that if the treatment was not successful, she at least had this moment of peace again before it was all over. "I feel great, Dr. Meyesus," she chuckled, grinning up at him with what must have been a silly look, but she didn't care. It felt too good to care. "Let's do it."

"Then we shall proceed," the Alandrian returned, pressing the plunger on the second hypodermic.

Beth went rigid as what felt like molten lava poured into her veins. She suddenly couldn't feel the table under her, or even sense the room around her. Every nerve on fire, every fiber of her being battling against the

onslaught on her senses, she screamed the chant in her mind, that inner voice panting harshly and echoing faintly inside the vast expanse of her augmented senses.

And then the images began, bringing with them an onslaught on her other senses. As her heart pounded in her ears, she saw, smelt, heard, tasted, and felt everything she had ever experienced in her entire life, scenes like motion pictures crashing into her at lightening speed, threatening to overwhelm her. They went so fast, like the fleeting memories that fired them into existence, but each event remained singular, the time encapsulated from hours into a heartbeat, each sensation as true to life as it was when originally experienced. But different somehow.

She saw her father standing over her, tasted the salty tears that flowed freely down her eight-year-old face the day that he told her that her cherished old dog had gone to live on a farm upstate where he could run free in his last years. But in that flash of perception, she knew that her father had the dog put to sleep, and that he had cried all the way to the vet's office that day and all the way home. She wasn't sure how she knew, she just did. But that was just the beginning. All the childhood memories, all the deceptions and white lies, big and small, paraded across her senses in blinding intensity, drawing an infinite sadness to her heart, a dull ache that she felt below her breastbone despite the chant that echoed in her head, despite the calming effect of the Trora.

Then came visions of adult life, and of Chad. She watched almost dispassionately as event after event in their seven years together rolled across her consciousness, all the untruths coming to the foreground, every deceit. But with the image of him came the visions of so many of her friends, their smiling faces hiding horrible truth as she confided her fears about him to them, their faces concerned, but all the while knowing that they themselves shared the blame with Beth's philandering husband, for many of them had been partners in the deceptions. All the affairs, all the lies. The chant sang out loud in her head as they flowed across her field of vision, instinct trying to protect her from the pain that truth brought with it.

And in a flash, she saw the TV news story that ran the day the Alandrains arrived on Earth. But with it came the truth as well. She lost the stabilizing mantra when the realization hit her like a thunderclap and her mind began to scream, the sound pounding at her body and beating her soul. Compared to the revelations she had experienced in the past few minutes, or was it hours, the horrible global truth made her lose her grasp on herself completely. Lost in the vortex of fact, Beth reached out blindly, catching her lifeline, and spinning away on the murmurings of the soft chant reverberating through her head, clinging to it rather than the reality

she had just become a party to.

She heard her name being called from what sounded like a million miles away, and she tried so hard to ignore it, but hands grabbed her, and would not let her slip away from them. The mantra in her head increased in volume as the intruders into her consciousness tried to pull her back to the treatment room, tried to stop her from escaping forever. Beth fought them with every scrap of strength she could muster, but she was lost, hopeless as she spun out of control. Inside the echoes of her mind, she screamed as they found a hold on her, as ghostly fingers encircled her arms and legs and dragged her down, until the hard examining table was suddenly under her body once more.

Something rigid was shoved between her teeth, and she realized faintly that she was shaking violently despite the hands that held her, seizures wracking her thin frame. As they fought to restrain her, she fought inside the strange alien distillation that raced through her veins. But the only thing she could hold fast to was the chant in her head, the soothing water that brought peace, and she finally sighed deeply, her body relaxing on the treatment table as she released her grasp on the edges of her torn world and let herself slip beneath the cool surface of freedom.

When the alien voice invaded her consciousness once more, Beth had no awareness of how long she had remained submerged there, only that she was reluctant to leave the peace that she had found. But the voice was insistent, as were the hands that moved her arms, her legs. They would not allow her the peace she craved so badly. The mantra in her head was still with her, soothing the raw extremities of her soul and mind, but it had changed somehow, taken on a lyric tone that seemed light and airy compared to before. It wasn't until her eyes began to flutter open that she realized why. The pain was gone. Not just pushed back behind gritted teeth. Gone.

A circle of faces surrounded her when her eyes finally focused, human and Alandrain, sharing concern. She had almost forgotten about them. Dr. Meyesus ran one indigo finger up in front of her face, and her pupils tracked it as it moved, bringing soft sighs of relief from the assemblage. Dr. Jamerson hurried forward, the human physician's face relieved as he checked her vitals, as he fretted over her as he always did. Smiling up at him, Beth felt tears bite at her eyes when she realized that she felt almost strong enough to rise, felt almost strong enough to survive. It was a feeling she had thought she would never feel again. The mantra within her sang of freedom, of life. She reached out with her mind to stroke the strings of it, and the chords rang clear and strong, filling her soul with hope.

From the edge of the group of people surrounding her, that whispery

voice caught Beth's attention, and she turned her radiant smile on the Alandrain doctor who stood at the side of her bed adjusting the IV drip. The clear glucose that trickled steadily into the drip chamber looked so shiny and clean that it caught her attention for a moment, so pure compared to the two hypodermic needles that studded the IV port, the darker colors of the two Alandrian drugs in their syringes vibrant as they stood poised for use. It seem as if her senses were fine tuned-sight, sound taste, smell-even the texture of the sheets under her felt so much more real. Dr. Meyesus caressed the colorful pair of hypos almost lovingly as he smiled back at her, his dark blue fingers trailing across amethyst and topaz blue essences from his home world. "They say that Renaque causes visions," he said softly, his voice comforting and softly caressing her as his crystalline eyes captured her attention once more. "Did you have visions, Beth?"

"I had dreams, Dr. Meyesus," she replied, the soft mantra in her head soothing and caressing her as his face twitched with interest.

"What kind of dreams, Beth?" he inquired in an almost whispered tone, raising the syringes between his long fingers like the most precious flowers, his smile on her face so radiant that the others in the room stopped their motions to absorb the warmth themselves. "Tell me about them," he continued, one thumb stroking across the pair of plungers like fine rose petals, his tone consoling, calming.

"Just fleeting images and vague thoughts, Dr. Meyesus," Beth replied, holding out one trembling hand to him. "Some bad, some good, but only dreams. I prefer reality. And the reality is...I'm cured, aren't I?" she asked as he stepped beside her and took her offered hand in his. She closed her eyes as their flesh touched, a look of fear crossing her features before she swallowed hard and opened her eyes once more, her expression a silent plea. "Please tell me I'm cured."

"Yes, Beth. You are," he replied, bringing her trembling hand up to his lips for the briefest of moments before putting it back beside her on the bed. "But you still need your rest. I'm going to have them take you to your room now, and I'll come see you later."

They helped her to the gurney that the orderly had waiting, and as the young man was rolling her from the treatment room, Beth caught the Alandrain doctor's sleeve for a second, smiling at him once more. "Thank you, Dr. Meyesues. You have no idea how much this means to me."

He simply smiled at her, and returned to putting away his needles and drugs as the orderly pushed her rolling bed out of the room once more, a trip she had only dared to hope she would be making. Beth laid back against the thin pillow, her eyes closed and her mind floating in the cooling chant, free once more now that the pain was gone. She barely noticed their movement along the corridor, floating on such euphoria she could have

danced the length of the hospital. The orderly maneuvered the gurney into the elevator with practiced ease before she finally allowed herself to open her eyes, and she found him smiling down at her as he stood beside.

"What did you see, Beth?" he asked almost conversationally, one hand coming to rest over hers soothingly as he hit the elevator button, stopping them between floors.

"See?" she asked him, aware that the tone of the chant in her mind swelled with his words and strange actions. She kept her face passive as she looked up at him for a long moment, her eyes searching his young face as if scouring it for something tangible before she lay back wearily and closed her eyes once more.

"The Alandrains plan to take this world," she told him in a flat tone. "To use us to make it to their liking, and then destroy us. They are not as they appear. But you know that, don't you, Gabriel?" she asked, opening her eyes once more and capturing his gaze. "That's why you warned me."

"Yes, Beth, I do," he replied softly. "What else do you know?"

Her sigh was weary once more as she continued. "That the Alandrian drugs I was given have a 100% cure rate for cancer. The people who died were the ones who woke up screaming the truth of what they learned at the top of their lungs," she sighed, the mantra in her head swirling up to help her combat the emotion of the words, its cool fingers soothing the ache in her heart. "They are the ones Dr. Meyesus used the amethyst colored drug on, the one they call Fuetran. Those people were the failures in the Alandrains' eyes, and the drug was coma inducing for a delayed death. The ones who awoke and simply curled into a fetal position went insane because they just couldn't handle what they learned. Dr. Meyesus gave those the topaz colored mixture, the one called Mawrun," she continued, knotting the sheet in her fists against her as her eyes pleaded with the young man beside her bed. "It keeps them insane, and therefore manageable until the time comes when they will be useful."

"And the ones who were cured?" Gabriel asked. He never flinched when she knew his name, but she knew instantly that he would not. She knew so much now, and it would have frightened her to death were it not for the chant that kept her strong. "Like you," he added, as if that needed to be said.

"We are timebombs," she whispered, her voice quaking with the reality of the words she spoke, "like a mole in a game of espionage. They can turn on us when they need us," she all but sobbed, reaching desperately for the young man beside her, the one with the gentle eyes. He gathered her into his arms, holding her close as silent sobs wracked her thin frame. "How did you know? My God, why haven't you stopped them?" she cried, the anger rising in her as she shoved him back with strength she had long

since lost. "Why did you let it go on?"

"We weren't sure, Beth. We only suspected," he replied solemnly, his soft brown eyes sorrowful as she hugged herself and fought to regain her chant, the mantra that kept her grounded when nothing else would. "You're our first proof," he added, gently brushing a stray lock of hair from her face before turning to start the elevator once more, punching the button for the ground floor. "And we will not let them in. But my first obligation is to get you to safety. I have a car waiting to take you there. All your questions will be answered as soon as we get you well."

She could only stare at him as he whisked her out of the back door of the hospital and into a gray New York afternoon.

His words were true. Of that she had no doubt.

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Saw Blade in Blue
Michelle Shulte

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The *Calliope* staff would like to thank the following people who made this edition possible:

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Calliope 1999

Armstrong Atlantic State University

Volume XVI

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A note from the editors

The editors of this year's edition of Calliope wish to thank all of those students that submitted their creative work. Based on the quality of the work received, we feel that we have been able to create an edition that is representative of Armstrong's student body, one that showcases its wealth of creativity and diversity. In addition to representing our fellow students, we are honored to have had the chance to play a hand in the creation of the last edition of Calliope of the twentieth century. We only hope that it is enjoyed enough to solidify the existence of Calliope in the years to come.

We wish to thank Dr. Chris Baker, who looked out for us without constantly looking in on us. While we were aware that he was always nearby if we needed help, he trusted us and let us do our own thing. We appreciate that. Next, we wish to thank Elaine Hakala, without whom this magazine may have been no more than a twinkle in our eyes. Her uncanny computer skills and her calm exterior are what got us through in the end, and for that we cannot thank her enough. We would also like to thank our friends and families for not abandoning or committing us. Along with them, we would like to thank our teachers, who have also been understanding of the responsibility that we undertook. We thank you all for bearing with us. We hope you agree that it was all well worth the effort. Enjoy.

on the cover: This year's cover is a hand-colored black and white photograph by Kellie Easterling entitled *Camille,* which is also the recipient of this year's award for outstanding artwork.

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Black Sand
Clair Buckner
silver gelatin print

Palm Sunday

Marcus Smith

The worm trees, laid down on snake
skin shed crowded streets, reach up in death to grasp
my soul and drown me longingly in the place.
Clamoring cowards, hiding in augural shadow, sleeping in
perfidious light,
linger like the phantoms that wash their backs
with quiver and sword, and call him to this dance.
This place of disquieted death, now buried in the sand dunes,
rolls on like discarded date seeds.

Palm oil, date oil, hand oil, now crushed against
the foreheads of the dying men, ran sane, hearing their breaks,
their whispers still caught in their shallowing yoked throats,
riles old men in death to rise and wash away in that river
insanely their names
calling their lord to sky and sea and chain,
breaking flesh against shackles
as grind stone rinds their bone under tanks.

And take this now, you who see in this pert night
the wrought day and the chiseled dawn, See you this now
in the blood cup, blood reaches and compounds the rabid dogs of sunken
men;
flesh spurns and wrinkles in the hungry mouth.
This the heart can cure, this the soul persuades.

Go
To those beneath the ancient behemoth of Christian Martyrdom
crying acid tears of mirth, go;
To those bent down in reverence to dead kings, kings who choke on the
smoke from burning bush, go;
To sick gods coughing on the smoke of their sacked cities, cities leaning on
their everlasting arms, go;
To bearded stone high men undulating in your priest-pelvis the
seed of coming nations in their belting voices, go;

To those who now see faintly that image growing and wavering
ever so gently beneath the tiny surface of the wild sea, go.
Pull not with galvanized screams the growing girth of two on sea and land.
Tell them quake and tremble in your breaks
for the day comes slowly.

The Red Shoes ... A Twisted Fairytale

Elaine Hakala

Once upon a time there was a young girl who lived in a beat up singlewide down by the lumberyard with her mother, six brothers, four sisters, and two of her mother's deadbeat brothers who did nothing but watch wrestling, drink beer, scratch themselves, and belch all day instead of looking for work. They were all so poor that they didn't even mind the condemned sign on the trailer door when they moved in ... it looked like a palace to them after the roach-ridden one bedroom apartment they had shared before that. Sure, there were holes in the floor big enough that they had to keep all their food, even the drygoods, in the old, wheezing Fridgidare to keep the raccoons out of it when they snuck in at night ... but it was home.

Despite the fact that they were poor, their mother always hustled them off to the Antioch Apostolic Revival Church every Sunday to hear the Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell preach hellfire, brimstone and redemption through "JeeeEEEeeezzzz-uussss (hallelujah ... amen!!)" This one particular Sunday, the girl, whose name was Sunshine (named after the little baker on the saltine cracker box with the fat belly and the flat head ... because that's who her brother Morton said she looked like when she was born), was wearing her brother Pillsbury's hand-me-down black sneakers, four sizes too large with holes in them big enough to show the newspaper she'd stuck down in the toes so she could wear them without them flapping on her heels.

Right in the middle of *How Great Thou Art*, Sunshine noticed that Miss Jordan in the next pew was staring at her old tennis shoes ... and just shaking her head. It made the girl's face turn red to realize just how poor she really was. And it got worse after the last notes of the hymn were finished and they filed out of the church, because old Miss Jordan called Sunshine over to her car as soon as the girl managed to get her hand away from the Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell at the door of the old church ... luckily without him insisting that he give her a kiss on the cheek, too (hallelujah ... amen!!).

"Yes, ma'am?" Sunshine asked as she reached the big, old Buick, remembering that her mother had told her that just because they were poor ... it didn't give them license to be rude as well.

"Child, is that the only pair of shoes you have?" the old woman asked, and when Sunshine nodded sadly, Miss Jordan reached into the back seat of her car and pulled out a pair of bright red tennis shoes ... Keds ... a finer pair than Sunshine had ever seen before in her entire life, despite the

old woman told her, pushing them into her hands. "I think they'll fit you better. I only wear them to garden in, and you look like you could use them a lot more than I can."

With a happy smile on her face, Sunshine thanked Miss Jordan and skipped back to join her family for the long walk home, the red shoes clasped to her chest that pounded with excitement.

Three days later, Sunshine's mother was hit by a speeding bread truck, and pronounced dead on arrival at the charity clinic at the hospital. Three days after that, Sunshine and her new red Keds, along with all her brothers and sisters, walked behind the plywood coffin carrying her mother out to the little cemetery behind the Antioch Apostolic Revival Church after the Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell gave a loud and lamenting eulogy over the body (hallelujah ... amen!!). Sunshine noticed several of the old women in the congregation giving her feet evil looks during the funeral. She knew that red Keds weren't appropriate for church, but she didn't care. All she cared about was that her mother was gone.

After the service, the people from Family and Children Services were waiting with a big van, and they loaded Sunshine and all her brothers and sisters into it, then took them to the Crestview Orphan's Home out on Highway 52. Sunshine hated it immediately, so she decided that she was going to find herself a foster family quick ... even if she had to kiss every well-meaning butt that walked into the home looking for a child to care for.

It didn't take her long. A week later she was sent home with Mrs. Blanchard, a woman who must have been two hundred years old if she was a day, who promptly made Sunshine strip when they got to her house and put on some scratchy new clothes that had been bought for her. They were dowdy and swallowed her like a crokersack, and the shoes she was given to wear with them were flat-black and square-toed, just like something an old woman would wear.

Sunshine watched sadly as her almost new red shoes were thrown in the trash with the rest of her clothes.

A couple of years passed, and Sunshine grew into a curvy teenager with a body that no amount of old lady clothes could hide. She and Mrs. Blanchard had learned to get along pretty good ... except when it came to what Sunshine should wear. Because the old woman was so strict, as soon as Sunshine got out of the house in the morning on her way to school, she would unbutton the buttons on her plain, white blouse to show off her

cleavage and roll up the waistband of her dark tweed skirt till her long legs caught every boy's attention. It got easier as she got older, because she got better at adjusting the frumpy clothes into something more appealing, and because Mrs. Blanchard was getting so blind (bless her heart) that she didn't notice as often anymore.

But no matter how hard she tried, Sunshine was always the "poor" girl at school ... and everyone knew it ... especially Amber Webster. Amber's dad owned the lumberyard near where Sunshine used to live, and he bought Amber anything she wanted. Sunshine tried her best to not be jealous of Amber (because that's what the Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell preached, and because that's just what the little bitch wanted), but sometimes she caught herself staring with envy at the little, cute skirts and the fluffy angora sweaters Amber strutted around school wearing.

But nothing compared to the red shoes Amber came walking in wearing one day. Sunshine's heart almost broke when she saw them. Five-inch heels. Gold buckles. Red patent leather ... the good stuff, not the cheap vinyl imitation leather that everyone else wore (Sunshine knew this little bit of trivia because she heard Amber explain the difference to Susy Smith ... and to Melissa Granger ... and to Judy Trooper ... and that was just in homeroom). They were so bright that they brought back memories of her own dearly loved red Keds, and that memory brought a small tear to her eye.

Time came for Sunshine to get her first communion at the Antioch Apostolic Revival Church. Mrs. Blanchard had started taking Sunshine there as soon as she moved in with her, trying to keep things as normal as possible for the little lost, lamb (that's what Mrs. Blanchard called Sunshine ... after she'd had a few glasses of elderberry wine to "keep her blood thin"). Sunshine had managed somehow to get through all of her communion classes without the Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell managing to trap her in a corner for a "JeeeEEEeeezzzz-uussss loves you hug (hallelujah ... amen!!)" like he tried to give all the teenaged girls in the classes. She was as excited about her first communion as she was to be through with him as a teacher.

To celebrate the event, Mrs. Blanchard and Sunshine rode the bus to the mall to buy her a new dress and shoes. Sunshine could hardly contain herself in the stores, fingering so many pretty things, but she could have spit nails when Mrs. Blanchard picked out a boring old navy blue dress for her ... high-necked white lace collar ... and PLEATS that made her look like a whale!! The girl was fuming when they finally got to the shoestore, but the display in the window stopped her cold. Five-inch heels.

Gold buckles. Red patent leather ... the good stuff, not the cheap vinyl imitation leather that everyone else wore ... with a big tag on them that said "1/2 off."

Sunshine's head was swimming as Mrs. Blanchard ordered the salesman to bring out a pair of the old lady shoes she'd picked out. "And the ones in the window?" Sunshine added hopefully. Mrs. Blanchard was busy looking at the displays, and when the salesclerk returned with two boxes, Sunshine almost shoved him down grabbing the box that contained the red shoes.

She put them on her feet ... and they were like magic. They made her feel like she was a fairy princess, or something very close to that, and she did a few dance steps in the three-way mirror just to see how they'd look.

She had to have them. She just HAD to have them.

So she formed a plan. She tried on the old looking black shoes, showed them to Mrs. Blanchard who was still standing on the other side of the store, and then went back to the salesman and said "she wants me to have the red ones." She knew it was a lie, but she just couldn't help it. And since the box was closed when Mrs. Blanchard came to the cash register to pay for them, she never saw that a switch had been made. "How much?" the old woman asked.

"That will be $21.97," the clerk replied.

"I thought they were more," Mrs. Blanchard remarked, making Sunshine's blood freeze in her veins.

"No, Ma'am," the man returned, taking the money Mrs. Blanchard counted out of her change purse before returning it to its safe haven inside her bra. "They're on sale."

Sunshine had to try hard to keep from dancing as they left the store and headed to the bus, the red shoes tucked safely under her arm.

The day of her first communion dawned gray and rainy, and it wasn't hard to hide those bright red shoes from Mrs. Blanchard, who started off the day with some elderberry wine ... just in case. But as Sunshine entered the church, marching in the procession behind the advent banners, she could feel the entire congregation staring at her feet. And things got worse when she made it to the altar rail. The Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell, who had started his opening welcome, stopped in mid-sentence and just pointed at those red shoes. "Those are dancing shoes, young lady," his voice suddenly boomed across the church. "Not communion shoes (hallelujah ... amen!!)."

Sunshine couldn't help herself. She was so very tired of the way

the preacher behaved that she just didn't care anymore. Grinning at the Reverend, whose face was growing more critical every second, she took a few dance steps ... just to show him that he was right.

"I won't have you at my altar wearing those jezebel shoes!!" he screeched, pointing at the door at the far end of the aisle. "Out of this house of God, you immoral hussy (hallelujah ... amen!!). I thought you had learned better ... but I see that the taint of your family will always be on you."

Sunshine's face went as red as the shoes, her anger at him flaring instantly. How dare he speak that way to her about her scattered and dearly departed kinfolk? She turned around with a sharp snap and stomped back toward the door. Mrs. Blanchard was white-faced and trembling when she stood to follow her, but Sunshine had not had her say quite yet. "That's right, Reverend Mitchell," she bellowed as she reached the doorway and spun back around to face him. "They're dancing shoes ... so I can just dance my ass out of here."

She proceeded to do just that, but when she got to the bottom of the stairs, her feet kept right on dancing when she wanted to stop. Mrs. Blanchard was struggling to get down the stairs behind her, but Sunshine couldn't help her. All she could do was dance. It started to scare her pretty bad. Mrs. Blanchard yelled at her to stop as she finally made it down the stairs, but she just couldn't.

Luckily a man came walking by at that exact moment, and Mrs. Blanchard begged him to help her. They wrestled Sunshine down on the bus bench out in front of the Antioch Apostolic Revival Church and finally managed to get the shoes off of her feet, despite the fact that she kicked them both several times in the process. But when they finally got the shoes off, her feet were finally still.

Mrs. Blanchard was so shaken that she could barely climb up the steps of the bus when it finally came. Sunshine followed her, head down, barefooted, and sick in her heart.

Mrs. Blanchard went straight to bed when they got home, a glass of elderberry wine to calm her frazzled nerves, but not before throwing the red shoes in the garbage can in the kitchen.

Sunshine sat gloomily on the front porch of the house. It just wasn't fair that her wonderful shoes had turned out to be so evil.

But the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if maybe, just maybe, it had not been the shoes themselves, but rather Sunshine herself, just being evil like The Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell said (hallelujah ... amen!!). After all, she had conned Mrs. Blanchard into

buying the shoes for her.

But Mrs. Blanchard had spent good money on those shoes, Sunshine reasoned. It was a shame to see them thrown out. So she crept back in the house, rescued the shoes from the trash and hid them in her closet.

They haunted her. It got so bad after a few days that she started sleeping with them under her pillow, just so she could run her fingers across the red patent leather ... the good stuff, not the cheap vinyl imitation leather that everyone else wore. Before too long, she had convinced herself that it WAS her that was evil ... and not the shoes. And of course if she was evil ... the best thing for her to do was accept it and learn to live with it. And what better way to learn to live with it ... than to embrace it ... and just wear the damned shoes anytime she wanted to.

So she snuck them into her bookbag that next Friday morning, and headed off to school. As soon as she got there, she sat down on the bench out front and stripped off her old black shoes. When she pulled the red ones out of her bag, the sunlight glinted off the gold buckles, off the shiny red leather, and she knew instantly that she was doing the right thing. Smiling to herself, she dusted off her feet and slipped them into the red shoes.

Floating on air, Sunshine stood and started walking into the school.

She found Amber standing at the head of the stairs. "Nice shoes," Amber said, giving her a smile that could almost be called warm. Sunshine was so taken back that she blushed all over herself, and then took a couple of dance steps to show them off.

And couldn't stop.

The other kids standing around were ignoring her to start with, but as Sunshine continued to dance, they started noticing ... and laughing at her. She tried to stop, but her feet just kept right on dancing, and the more she danced, the more they laughed, and the redder her face got. She finally managed to dance back down the steps and then down the sidewalk to the street, the sound of their laughter ringing in her ears as she started trying to dance away.

It was awful. Her feet just wouldn't stop no matter how hard she tried. People on the street just looked at her funny as she danced by, tears rolling down her face. Her path took her by the Antioch Apostolic Revival Church, and The Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell was out front digging in the rose bushes. Sunshine shouted to him, begging him to help her, but as he rose and stretched his back, looking at her as she danced up to him, his face turned up into a smirk. "Harlot. Jezebel." he retorted. "I knew that

So she danced on, her feet taking her where they wanted to take her, her breath howling in and out of her chest from the exertion. She danced as the sun crested noon, then started that long, slow crawl toward the horizon. She danced past houses and shops and finally out past the railroad tracks at the edge of town as darkness started to cover the world. In the gloom ahead, she saw the old trailer she used to live in with her family, and remembered how happy she was there even if they were poor. Beyond it lay the lumberyard, looming in the distance.

Giving it everything she had, she started dancing toward it.

The security guard at the gate wasn't much older than she was, and when he saw her dancing up the dusty road leading to the mill, he got his flashlight and met her half way. "What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

"I can't stop ... I can't stop dancing," she managed to tell him, her voice thick with exhaustion and sobs. "Help me ... get ... these ... shoes ... off ... my ... feet."

He tried everything he could think of. He finally got her flipped on her back on the road, managed to get ahold of the shoes despite her frantic dance steps, but try as he might, he couldn't get the shoes to slip off of her feet. It was like they had grown attached to her skin. "There might be another way," he finally said, stepping back out of her range and wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Do it ... JUST DO IT!!" Sunshine shrieked. "I can't stand it any more."

Today, Sunshine dances on the little wooden legs that James, the security guard who still takes care of her to this day, carved for her as he spent long nights watching the lumberyard. They have a little cottage out near his job, with a cute little garden, two dogs, and three kids who adore them.

And the town still talks about how The Reverend Brother Billy Mitchell ran out of town and never came back (hallelujah ... amen!!), a pair of severed legs chasing him and kicking him in his sanctimonious ass the whole way.

Legs with red shoes on the feet.

Five-inch heels.

Gold buckles.

Red patent leather ... the good stuff, not the cheap vinyl imitation leather that everyone else wore.

untitled
Kellie Easterling
manipulated photograph

Old Paint

Heidi Butler

Colored paint,
Terracotta,
peels like skin off the window.
The men had come today,
with trucks and big,
gloved hands, to carry away my life.
They packed it up neatly
in their dirty yellow van,
and left me standing
emotionless on the front porch
staring at this old paint.
I'd painted it such a long time ago,
by myself,
all the trim on this tan house,
with its two rooms,
set back from the road,
solemnly waiting to sink into the ground.
I sit and rock,
not in a chair though;
they took that,
but on my hips,
with my knees tucked to my chin.
The edges of my skirt
that had been clean this morning
was soiled with moving around,
back and forth
through the rooms
collecting things.
As I rocked I could feel
my woolen socks
that had sagged around my ankles

start to sweat.
I shivered a little bit.
The sun was sinking,
and the shadows were slanting,
announcing unto my weary eyes
and into my weary head of late afternoon.
The red pickup drove in about then,
its shiny coat such a contrast
to the dusty road and the sinking house.
My son,
the eldest one
that lived a few counties over got out,
"Come on Mom, let's go home."
I could have said I *was* home.
I could have uttered a million other
protesting phrases,
but I didn't.
For some reason I was relieved to hear this command,
I was tired of the house and the yard
I'd spent my life in,
and for the first and the last time
I let him take me home to Gainesville.

untitled
Charlie Parker
silver gelatin print

The hero

David Seckinger

The hero enters, shining like the truth,
and evil trembles like an aged hand.
This familiar scene (fresh as desert sand)
is never wasted while tv feeds youth
some sugar poured on a new cutting tooth
and preaches, "Don't be scared to take a stand
because the hero gets the marching band
and Mary's sweet hand or kisses from Ruth."
So heroes march on, with movies for brains,
but villains see clearly from inside the womb.
So Able's unable to faze out Cain
and horror falls harshly on virtue's bloom.
But stories don't die. The lie still remains
because the truth is not heard from a tomb.

"I'm serious," Tim says, and continues, jabbing his spoon at Angela for emphasis. "When a guy says, 'I'd do her,' what he's really saying is, 'I would *admit* to doing her.' Big distinction there. Guys will do just about anything. Robert, back me up here."

"It's true," I nod seriously. "However, it can also mean, 'I would *brag* about doing her.'"

"Good point. It depends on the tone. Like this: 'I'd do her,'" Tim shrugs, glancing down into his coffee. "Now contrast that with—" a look of terrified awe creeps over his face, and he throws his head back, turning his face upward into the soft, dim glow of the coffee shop's lamp light. He reaches out, left hand still gripping the spoon, and reverently whispers, "— I would *do* her."

"Preferably set off by 'dude,' I add, and mimic Tim's pose and voice. "*Dude*. I would *do* her."

"That's it! That's it!," Tim laughs, and pounds the table. "'Dooood.' That's perfect."

Angela covers her face with her hands and looks utterly disgusted. "See, you think this is funny, but it's not. This is why I don't date."

"We just want you to know what it's like out there," I say, touching her arm in mock concern. "We just want you to be prepared."

"I know what it's like. That's why I don't date."

"Now you shouldn't isolate— shit. Don't look," I say quietly as Tim and Angela swivel around to face the door. "Jimmy alert." I grab a couple sugar packets, rip them open, dump them into my coffee. "Keep your eyes down. Tim— damn it. . ." No good. Tim's turned around completely, sitting bolt upright in the booth, looking straight at Jimmy and his latest loser friends. He loves this sort of thing, loves to watch me squirm, and suddenly I wish I hadn't come home from school this weekend.

"Why are you so nice to that idiot?," Angela stage-whispers. "He'll never leave you alone. He's going to sit down and talk forever. Great."

"I'm not nice," I protest, but I know what she means. She means I act indifferent toward Jimmy, and Jimmy doesn't take indifference for an answer.

I can't stand Jimmy. No one can, at least not in my circle of friends. He's one of those low self-esteem, self-fulfilling prophecy types. You know: hates himself, wants to be liked so he can feel good about himself, tries so hard he totally humiliates himself, feels like shit, hates himself.

Rinse and repeat. His only friends are people even worse off than he is. Problem is, he thinks we're buddies. I think he sees me as his connection to the elite: people like Tim and Angela, people with huge egos. Witty people, smart people, confident people. Popular people.

Back in high school, there was this guy, Scott Sharp. Popular guy. It was lunch time, and as usual Jimmy had invited himself to sit down at our table and be ignored. Scott, a 4.0 junior already receiving offers from some pretty prestigious schools, announced he was throwing a party the following weekend. Parents out of town, you know. He started making a guest list and wondered aloud who he should invite, writing down names as he thought of them.

"Don't forget me," Jimmy said, and grinned nervously.

"Yeah. Right," Scott dismissed, and turned to one of his friends. "Seriously, who else?"

I admired that bluntness, that ability Scott had to say exactly what he felt. I mentioned something to him later that day, and he said, "Why gloss over the facts? Why bother with social graces around people you don't care about? That's your problem, Robert. You're too nice. The only reason Jimmy sits at our table is because you throw him a bone every now and then. Don't do it. Let him know he's annoying you."

The thing that struck me most about that incident, though, the thing I remember most clearly, is that Jimmy just sat there. He didn't get up and walk away, didn't say or do a single thing to retaliate, to defend himself. He turned a little red and sat quietly, pretending to read, for the rest of the period.

This semester I'm taking an introductory psychology class, and I think I understand what's wrong with Jimmy.

There was this experiment performed on dogs. They were put in cages and shocked through the wire floors. They jumped at first, they whined, tried to break out. After a while, though, they gave up. They just sat there, taking it. Here's the part that really got to me, though: after the dogs got used to the shocks, *even after the scientists gave them a way out,* they didn't leave. They didn't even try. Learned helplessness, it's called. So even though Jimmy may think he's trying, he's not. He's still sitting in that cage.

So I'm sitting here stirring sugar into my coffee and Tim's trick has worked. I can feel Jimmy standing next to the table and I don't look up until he speaks.

"Hey, Robert. How's it going?"

I can feel Tim and Angela looking at me, demanding something, and I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. Anger wells up: anger at Tim for basically inviting Jimmy over, anger at Angela for pressuring me to do

something, anger at myself for my fear of hurting Jimmy's feelings, but mostly anger at Jimmy for pestering me, for being stupid, for not taking the hint, for not having a single clue that I hate him. I clear my throat. I look up.

"Hello."

"So what's going on? How's school? Man, I haven't seen you in months. What—"

"I'm busy, Jimmy. I'm talking to my friends. I don't want to be bothered." I can hear my voice shaking, and I wonder if the others can hear it too.

"Okay. Take it easy." But he keeps standing there, and after what feels like a full minute, he finally says, "Well, I guess I should go—"

"Okay bye." I stare blankly up at him, daring him to say anything else. Angela laughs.

Jimmy turns red, and for a second I think he's actually going to start crying right there. He doesn't. He turns and almost runs out the door, leaving his friends looking first at each other, then accusingly at me.

A few moments of silence, and I'm looking at my coffee again, feeling my cheeks burning, feeling sick.

A low whistle from Tim. "Well, somebody grew some balls! I didn't think you had it in you."

I try to smile, but can only grimace. "Yeah," I mumble. "I took a class." I sit there and can't think of anything else to say.

untitled
Reneé Lyon
silver gelatin print

untitled
Tiana J. Page
silver gelatin print

The Four Year War

(for P. on 38th Street)

Catherine Hope Greene

In downtown Savannah
the air weighs heavily—
a rapist's body,
the woman beneath.
Out there, outside,
the night people walk,
openly defiant,
in the streets.

I watch, I listen,
and now it's midnight again already

and I think 'we've been separated,
forced to fight alone.'
I call you on 38th Street,
hear your music in the background,
hear in your voice the intention to sleep.

I know that, involuntarily,
we won't survive this war
between what we need to do,
what we want to do,
between mind and heart.

And if my voice cracks,
it is because I cannot breathe—
my chest beneath this unyielding weight
of the air around me, the sounds around me.
And how are you going to keep me alive
if you are not here?

So I must come to you,
lay my body onto yours,
defy death to be the winner
as I draw my breath from your lips.

What the Thunder didn't Say

(for Fraser)

Melissa S. Hill

Your smile often catches me unaware,
naked and dripping, stepping down
from your ceremonial grounds,
safe from misspelled festivals and nights alone,
safe from the honey inside Satan's altar,
You often make known your unforgiving nature,
cold as hands dipped under winter;
always hiding in those words that play outside the meaning,
with those smoky spinning serpentine hisses,
designed to tell of days to come,
serving to remind of the last time you said goodbye.
Always your eyes are melting ice,
crystal blue inside my snow globe,
and I know you think to turn me upside down,
to shake me till I'm dry. Don't say a word.
Don't speak, sometimes.
One thing you have not learned about me:
I can be as cold as your hands, your heart, your soul,
and even fading I think I may have come to know
the passing of summer: all the planes have left,
and the clouds draw pictures beneath my silence,
but puff away, and begin to erase,
soft as the final kiss you laid
against the crook of my arm,
when all of my pulse and most of my life
were still enough to deliver you to the thunder.

Bell Tower
Sabrina Arango
silver gelatin print

Thoughts in the Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2nd Floor, Men's Bathroom Stall of Gamble Hall

John D. Trainor

Graffiti—the voice of the minority
speaks passionate expression.
The house of knowledge heavily layered
with an enamel face,
covering secret thoughts
of gagged voices:
but continue to generate
through defiance.

Country girls fuck best.
Kill all niggers.
Don't worry, when all is said and done
ALL THE FAGGOTS WILL DIE OF A.I.D.S.

...and all the enlightened before
who these voices learn their lessons
are forgotten to memories of martyrs
whose message was never heard.

The Hostel in the Forest
Alicia Lively
silver gelatin print

Rhett & Scarlet
Mike Rios
pen & ink

At The Gateway

Denise Shaw

As i stand and admire the forcible edifice
i notice cracks arising from the foundation
No . . . not yet

i can't face the dissolution
i need to admire it a little longer
i need to contain its memory

Languor intrudes
unwearied
to consume it away

immersed in sorrow
i stand aside
i'm powerless

i fight every fiber of my being to fix it
make it whole again
It can not be

i fall down and embrace the remaining foundation
i try to hold on . . . i can not
i must let it go

I have my own edifice to tend to.

untitled
Daphne B. Wooten
silver gelatin print

Thinky Pinky Lipstick

Dana Skiljan

Lipstick on the coffee cup
Can you relate?
He was not calling
As much lately
No! It's not my shade
It's much brighter than mine.
My catty-self thinks tacky color
Would he be caught dead
With a woman wearing….
Thinky pinky
What can I do?
Can I ask…
Who's been drinking from my cup?
No. It's not mine.
He can't be had
He's not available
He's only my waiter
In this restaurant
For tonight
Tomorrow I'll be gone.

Dramatic Monologue

Stacy Sims

I didn't know what white trash meant until Jeff Bradley told me that those people smelled funny and their shoes always looked like they came from the Big K. I laughed, even though my mama bought my shoes at the same store. The whole store smells like that hair place on Kentucky Avenue where my mama goes to get her permanent. She says that permanent makes her look beautiful, even though her hair stinks up our house something awful. It smells like greasy fried chicken. Permanents and the Big K do. I like fried chicken. Mama says that I eat the tar out of it.

I got a note sent home with me today from Mr. Russell. I think it says that I'm in trouble because I... I can't read his writing. It looks like the scribble that my cousin Betsy does in her coloring books. My writing has gotten better ever since me and mama practiced. She writes the dotted lines on the pages of my D'Nealian tablet, and I fill them in. Mama says that the D'Nealian books are a waste of time. She learned to write on regular paper. Now, what's the harm in that? She had to save money for my school supplies because, since I turned seven, I have to have what everybody else has. I felt bad because, two weeks before school started, mama and me were in the new grocery store, which doesn't just sell groceries. It sells cassette tapes and balloons too. I saw an Incredible Hulk lunch box on aisle seven and I begged mama to get it for me. It was the last one and my mama put her purple eyeshadow back and bought it for me. On the first day of school, I forgot the thermos on the lunchroom table and someone who didn't know it was mine threw it away, I think. I know that we're poor. Mama told me so I wouldn't expect so much, and I try not to. Last Sunday, we were in the Big K buying me new underpants cause my old ones have holes in them. Mama said that she felt awkward buying underwear on the Lord's Day, and a couple of times we had to hide from the good Christians. We stay at home and watch the midget preacher on channel seven. Mama gives me a special treat on Sundays cause I'm facing another long, hard week and I deserve it. My treat is always the same. A piece of Bazooka bubblegum. I don't really like the gum. I just chew it a little and then swallow it. I like the Bazooka Joe comics inside the wrapper. I have to be careful cause a couple of times I got too excited and ripped the comic on accident. I have a whole collection in a shoebox under my bed. One day, when the box is filled to the top, I'm going to sell them and turn a profit to give to Mama, so she can have as much purple eyeshadow and permanents as she wants.

Unforgotten Childhood
Patrick LaPollo
mixed media

untitled
Reneé Lyon
polaroid transfer

untitled
Reneé Lyon
polaroid transfer

Cleansed
Cara L. Wade
Van Dyke brown ortho print

Voltage

(electricity + eccentricity = elexentricity)

Melissa Hill

For electric lights and electricity,
live wires and looping fans,
bent between the beds we made
and this bed I lay in,
till we go creeping across the spider's parlor—
the shadow of a lover's hand. . .
How many circuits must I build to make me bleed?

Nineteen years I've been dividing,
bolt by bolt to build the machine;
left inside poison ivy and honeysuckle vines,
poison is just another lover to kill and drink,
and tastes like angels going down.
I'm burning it now— so how many amps?

Pain is the light that lances my eyes,
a tiny eclipse of the soul
in electric blues that can build no world,
or move me up or down;
You know I'm scared of the darkness
and I'm swimming in my lies—
so I have to wrap myself in some sort of light.
I know he said to have.
I think I heard to hold.

But to forget him— how many volts?
I decided today to wake in grace
with a knife in my back and one in my veins.
I bleed sparks in showers of crimson and gold,
burned black to the fingers where the scars never show—
And if I could flash silver and let the light consume my scars—
How many arcs?

How many years till my eyes fly open,
connectors react and wake the machine?
And will she know the things I know,
and will she see the things I've seen?
I have nothing pure left to give her,
but I've cut myself for a year or more—
She'll take my soul, defined in voltage,
and of course my heart, dead electric arc—
She'll take my eyes as amps, deadliest of all,
though they never lit the way for me;
And through all these wires, she will program my death,
take over my circuits and go looping all through me,
to take apart my metal existence,
flipping the switch on her eccentricity.

untitled
Angie Hernden
silver gelatin print

The Failure

Dan Van Brunt

Deputy Peter Flemming arrived at work at the Faraway County Sheriff's Office at five minutes to eight, and was surprised to be greeted by Deputy Josephine Browning instead of Will, the little old man who served as dispatcher.

"Sheriff just called in, told me not to take off on my beat yet, but to sit tight until he gets here. Wants you to do the same." This was Joey Browning's way of saying good morning.

"Good morning to you too, Joey," Flemming replied, as he stepped into the little office. Faraway County was the smallest and third least populated county in Arkansas, and fittingly had a small and unpopulated sheriff's department. Besides Browning and himself, there were only three other officers, including Sheriff Edward C. Calhoun. The tiny facility they used looked more like a bail bondsman's office than one a county sheriff would use. The main room was lit by the brilliant early-morning sunshine coming through barred windows.

Flemming thought the place was more of a nighttime room—it didn't feel right in the daylight. The sun revealed the dingy yellow shag carpet and the old wormwood paneling, which somehow looked better at night—as if the furnishings knew their cheapness. Three battered desks took up half the floor on the opposite end from two cells. Each cell was about twenty by twenty, just big enough for a small cot, a sink and a toilet. Privacy for prisoners was not a pressing concern.
Once they'd had a woman they brought in to sleep off a bad drunk, and she had complained loudly, not wanting to relieve herself with two lawmen in the same room. She kept yelling about her right to privacy until she just pissed herself and went to sleep. By the time her husband came to bail her out, she was stinking up the whole place.

The only other rooms were a small bathroom and a storage room that adjoined the main office by way of a dimly lit hall that had one of those step-downs in it. Deputy Flemming forgot about that step sometimes when he had to go to the john—he nearly broke his fucking collarbone one time.

"Where's Will?" Flemming asked, as he looked around for the creaky dispatcher who usually was chattering away all the time—the office seemed empty and silent without him.

"Boss said he called in sick," Browning replied, as she rocked back and forth in her chair. "That's newsworthy, too, since Will ain't been sick one day that I can remember. That tough old bastard'll probably outlive us

all." Browning said all this without taking her eyes off the papers she had in hand. She was a small, athletic young woman whom Flemming found attractive, but Pete Flemming thought she'd be a lot more attractive if she'd lay off the chewing tobacco. Her can of Copenhagen snuff lay on the desk, next to the ever-present Mountain Dew can she used as a spittoon. She was dipping now, and it made her lisp a little.

Flemming heaved his bulky frame into another chair behind a desk and looked out the window at the green countryside, and reflected on the past few months.

"How'd I wind up here?" he thought. He'd been a bouncer in a strip club for years, but decided to get out of the big city and find a job he could take a little pride in. He'd grown tired of his job, and having grown up in a small town in Oklahoma, decided to get away from the bustle and the violence that had been his life and get back to the country. The only problem was that in a small town, you had to take whatever job you could get; Faraway wasn't exactly the land of opportunity.

So he took the only job he could find. It was offered to him by the sheriff himself one day as Flemming was walking down Main Street in his only suit and tie as he applied and interviewed at practically every place in town. He took the job, thinking that maybe it would be more fulfilling than bouncing. So far, however, he thought that being a cop wasn't much different from being a bouncer, except that he kicked people into instead of out of his place of employment. He'd only been in town for four months, and only been a deputy for three. He thought he'd give the job six months before he decided to stay or not; yeah, six months, then time to re-evaluate his situation.

He ran his hand through his shock of black hair, smelled coffee, and decided on a cup. Whatever habits Joey Browning had, the bitch sure could make a pot of coffee, he thought. He filled a Styrofoam cup, returned to his seat, and wondered if Browning had a spittoon on her nightstand, for that after-sex dip of snuff. The thought made him shudder a little, but it turned him on, too, as he pondered on what kissing her would taste like.

The sound of the sheriff's cruiser crunching the gravel out front woke Flemming from his thoughts. He rose to greet the sheriff, as did Browning, who carefully placed her precious forms on the side of her desk. The door was thrown open and the sheriff strode in, leading a handcuffed man with lank hair and a two-day beard. The guy smelled like he needed a bath, too. Flemming scowled—he smelled like a fish market's back room at the end of a long, hot day.

"Get in here, boy. That's it. Hey, Joey gimme a hand with this son of a bitch. He ain't too keen on this whole thing." Browning went over to help the sheriff muscle the reluctant man inside and over to a chair in front

of the booking desk in the corner.

"Found this guy out by the Darnell's lake, sleeping next to the dock. Ken Darnell wants him charged with trespassing. He was fishin' in their lake, and they claim some stuff is missing of theirs, too. Whew, he smells like people must have before soap was invented. Damn punk, sit down." The man refused, looking like he hadn't even heard. "I said sit down." Calhoun gave the man a rough shove, and he stumbled over the chair and cringed into it. He then just sat there, looking down into his lap, his long hair falling into his face.

"Damn drifters, think they run the show. Around here I run the show, you hear me?" Calhoun was angry, red-faced, and pointing his finger at the man, inches from his nose. Calhoun was not a big man, but he had that kind of presence, Flemming thought, a sort of intense quality that commanded your attention. That is, if you weren't a stoned out loser like this guy, anyway. Flemming thought that if this dude didn't start answering the sheriff soon, that things could get ugly. He knew what Calhoun was capable of, and had even helped out in "straightening out" a couple of prisoners, but the thought of beating this guy suddenly gave Flemming a queasy feeling. There was something different about this one.

The drifter was wearing a sport coat with leather patches on the elbows, like he'd been out at a poetry reading and decided to hitchhike across Arkansas on a sudden impulse, stopping only to poach fish out of private lakes. The whole time that the Sheriff and Browning were taking his fingerprints and trying to get his name, he just sat there, dazed. Flemming wondered what he was on. Finally, they got the information they needed from his driver's license.

"Parker, Philip G. Hey, buddy, that you?" Calhoun was looking back and forth from the picture on the card to the man's face. "Guess it could be, if you'd had a shave and a haircut recently." Flemming thought the man did need a shave, and his hair was too long; it wouldn't help him around here. Calhoun especially hated guys with long hair. Flemming had his own doubts about this Parker guy; that feeling of uneasiness still lingered. This guy had on really nice shoes, even though they were now covered in mud and slime. What transient has loafers like that? Flemming began to actively wonder just what the sheriff was up to when Calhoun called over to him:

"Pete, put this piece of shit in the first cell, while I start processing his paperwork. Joey, go out to my car and get his stuff—there's two bags in the trunk, and we need to go through them and catalog the stuff so we can tell if any of the Darnell's stuff they claim to be missing is in there."

"You got it, boss." Flemming said. He got up and collared Parker and roughly pulled him up, half carrying him to the cell. He threw him in

and slammed the door shut just as Browning walked out the door. He turned to find the sheriff standing at his elbow.

"Come over here, Pete. I've got a job for you." Calhoun grabbed Flemming's arm, and walked him away from the cell.
"I'm gonna leave you two here alone with this clown in a minute, and I want you to try and get this guy softened up a little while I'm gone. The Darnells made some other accusations besides trespassing and poaching. They claim that he broke in to their house, took some stuff, and…" Calhoun trailed off, wiped his hand across his mouth, then continued: "Pete, they claim that he raped their daughter."

"Holy shit, that little girl? She can't be much more than 9 or 10 years old for Chrissakes," Flemming said.

"Yeah, LuAnnes' 10 this fall. Look, I have to go to the hospital over in Hot Springs to see what the docs find, and to take some more statements from the Darnells. I didn't want to mention any of this in front of Joey, you know? Frankly, I've known Ken and Janine Darnell my whole life, and God help this shithead if he really did force himself on that little girl. I know what you can do, and I'm sure that I can count on you to do what is necessary to get this guy to see how important it is that we communicate." Flemming knew what this meant. Calhoun wanted him to beat the shit out of this Parker fella until the man broke down and confessed to raping the Darnell girl.

"OK, boss I know what to do," Flemming said, as he wondered if he really did or not anymore. He realized that in a few minutes, he'd probably need to open that cell door and beat a confession out of a man whose only crime might be drifting into this town with a sissy haircut. Browning came back in with Parker's bags—one was an Army duffel—and threw them on the floor next to the hallway. Calhoun announced:

"Joey, I'm going back to the Darnells to get the whole report since we're short-handed today with Will out sick. Wait 'till I get back to open them bags, but while I'm gone, you can do the write-up on this creep. You're a better typist than I am anyway." Browning didn't look the least bit concerned at this turn of events. She cared more for her paperwork than she did for people, he sometimes thought. Calhoun promised to be back around noon and left, his big Ford slinging gravel as he whipped out of the lot. Browning went over to the booking desk, grabbed up Parker's forms, and headed to her own desk. She glanced over at Flemming, and he felt a strange sense of foreboding when he heard her say,

"Looks like we've both got our work cut out for us this morning, huh Pete?" Her wide smile showed too many of her teeth, stained from her chew. She parked it at her desk, turned her little radio up louder, and dismissed Flemming and the room at large. Flemming turned to see what

the prisoner made out of all this, but he only sat there exactly as before, and if he had any clue as to what was going on, he did not show it.
Some new country singer started in on a lousy rendition of an old Hank Williams song on Browning's radio as Flemming removed his gun belt, and threw it over the back of his chair. He went over to the cell door, and opened it with a key from his large ring, and then he went inside, swinging the door shut behind him. He tossed his key ring over towards his desk, and missed. The keys made a hollow clang when they landed instead in a little gray wastebasket, and Flemming sighed.
When they were through, he would call Browning to let him out. This way, if he were overpowered, the prisoner at least would remain confined. Flemming seriously doubted that this dude could overpower anybody, but procedure was procedure. He almost laughed at himself then, but it caught in his throat. Procedure? Where in the police manual did it list procedures for beating on a suspected child rapist?

Flemming tried to turn his mind to the task at hand.
"Hello, anybody in there?" he asked. The man still acted like there was no one in the cell with him. Flemming started to anger—he looked hard at Parker, and grabbed his head to make the man look into his eyes. The man's gaze was totally vacant. He was definitely on something.

"Hello," he shouted directly into the man's face. "If you can hear me, give me a sign. Hell, if you can't hear me, give me a sign." Flemming was stalling, and he knew it. He knew what was expected to do, but then, all of a sudden, he felt with total certainty that he could not go through with it. The thought flashed in his mind like lightning—this was a frame job. Flemming had no doubts in his mind that Calhoun or someone had found this guy travelling through town and had slipped him something, and now they were using him as a scapegoat. Who was responsible? Flemming knew that Calhoun was part of it, but beyond that, he didn't know. He just wanted to get out of this cell with this obviously drugged man, just get away altogether. He'd had his suspicions before about how on the level this department was, but he saw it as if for the first time in that cell that day, and he was frightened.

He turned towards Browning, to get her attention, and saw that he already had it. She was standing right outside the cell, with her arms folded. He hadn't even heard her cross the room, but there she was, looking like a schoolteacher regarding a slow, stupid child.

"Let me out of here, I can't go through with this," he said.

"Sheriff was right, you are weak after all. He saw the signs, you know. He had a feeling that this is what would happen sooner or later. That's what today's little test was designed to do—make you face your weakness. Flemming confusedly reached out to Browning, clawing at the air.

"Come on, I said I'm not gonna do it, now let me out!" he felt panic rise, but beat it down for the moment. He saw and felt Browning's smile as she backed away, carefully keeping out of his reach.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, not until you do your job. You are not to leave that cell until that man confesses to child molestation, or is rendered unconscious, or whatever." At that last, she smiled that yellow toothy grin, and Flemming felt he might throw up. How did she know? Calhoun said he didn't want her to know. How many times had this little scenario happened in the past? Was the sheriff some serial rapist who pinned his sex crimes on unwitting travelers? Flemming thought that unlikely, but maybe the man had tendencies and couldn't hide them forever. But, Browning sure seemed to know a lot, too.

He wished that he was a thousand miles away, or that he'd called in sick, or that he had his keys—anything to keep from having to think about what it was that he was being asked to do, which was obviously to help put this guy Parker away on some trumped-up charge.

"Joey, is there something you know about this that you aren't telling me?" Flemming decided to try and talk his way out. What other choice did he have?

"What do you think, city boy? That weirdos only live in the big towns? Everybody's got needs—sometimes the sheriff's get him into trouble. Too bad for you that you figured it out though. You were supposed to be a big dumb ox, but you went and got too smart for your own good." With this, Browning walked over towards Flemming's chair, where his gunbelt was.

"Looks like you forgot to take off your gun belt before you went in the cell with that pedophile," she said, smilingly. Flemming realized in horror what she meant to do.

"Don't do it, Joey!"

"Rookie mistake, nothing I could do but kill him after he already shot you," Browning went on. You'll be remembered as the dumbest cop this county's ever had, and we've been through about ten in the past five years. They keep dying, or running off, or turning up missing." She laughed her nasty laugh, and pulled Flemming's .357 out of its holster.
"This is where we part company, sweetheart…"

Flemming shut his eyes, didn't listen for the sound of the shot. It was incredibly loud when it went off—it sounded to him like the world was ending.

untitled
Charlie Parker
silver gelatin print

Downpour

Hal Thomas

You entered my life suddenly
And unexpectedly
Like a summer afternoon thundershower

Ever since,
I have been caught
In the torrential downpour
of you.

It has been some time
since I have been forced to swim;
Now I'm drowning in the floods
Of thoughts of you.

Every minute I spend with you
is another drop from
the raincloud . . .

So let it rain.

Kyla's Shirt

Heidi Butler

Her shirt reminded me of the blue and white china teacups my grandmother gave me when I was small and didn't realize their little value. I broke one soon after, no one yelled, and I still didn't realize their little value. I've misplaced them now, somewhere in my attic, I think, or maybe . . . well I couldn't really tell you where, I guess. I like her shirt though. It's towering blue buildings, with angular roofs and broken up trellises., crowded behind white clouds and yellow blossoms. It fits so nice on her too. I'm sure I couldn't wear it, even if I were skinnier. It's the way she holds her shoulders, the way she arches her back, and maybe the way the silky fabric rests just above her hips that makes it seem as if no one in the world could wear it except her, as if it were made for her frame, and hers alone. It's not that it especially flatters her, or makes her look like some gorgeous supermodel. In fact, I don't see how a supermodel could wear it. Maybe it's her: her personality, her strange poses and the way her short, dirty blonde hair lays on the collar in a soft mess of imperfect color. I think I could imagine a man's mind, the way he looks at a woman, the way he notices her smile, her curves. I can love a face, the way the eyes set on an object with laughter or seriousness, the way the eyebrows arch or the fingers twitch nervously on jeans. I think women are beautiful, all women, true women,. You can tell from the outside just how lovely they are inside, the way their hearts beat steadily, the way their lips part full and pink when they don't even realize they're staring into space.

Then come the sick ones, the empty ones, the ones that step hollow shoes on voiceless streets. They have no beauty, no spark, no softness. Their eyes are knives, their tongues vipers, their heads mush.

untitled
Tiana J. Page
silver gelatin print

Dressing on the Side

Elaine Hakala

The dried whatever it was would not come off the fork, no matter how hard she scraped against it with one manicured nail.

"You'll love the country steak," he prompted, looking over the greasy menu at her and grinning. "They'll put extra gravy on it if you want, and Della makes some damned good milk gravy."

Her white silk blouse felt like it was sticking to her. The diner was like a blast furnace, heat rolling across the smoky room from the grill on the other side of the counter. It sent up clouds of steam every time the weasely looking man with tattoos on his arms flipped over whatever it was he was cooking.

The smell of grease mixing with her Chanel #5 was nauseating.

"Why didn't we just go to that little Italian place like I asked you to?" she asked, glaring at him as she returned the menu to the cheesy chrome rack behind the grimy salt and pepper shakers. Snagging one of the cheap paper napkins out of the canister, she wiped her hands off disgustedly. "I'd have even settled for MacDonald's, Frederick. At least they're cleaner."

"Don't be that way, Elizabeth" he murmured in that sexy drawl that made her melt, reaching across the filmy formica table to take her hand, absently spinning the big diamond engagement ring around on her second finger as he chided her. "You know that Della is an old friend of the family."

"I know that I'll have to take this outfit to the cleaners first thing in the morning," she returned peevishly, withdrawing her hand from his and folding it in her lap with the other one, just so she didn't have to touch anything. "I'll probably take it off in the garage when we get home and put it in a plastic bag so I don't have to smell it in the car in the morning. I KNOW I don't want it smelling up my house."

His face crinkled up in exasperation, but his rebuttal was cut short by the appearance of a grossly obese woman ... sporting a huge, dingy lace contraption pinned to her pink polyester uniform by a plastic name tag that read "Della."

"FREDDY!!" the woman squealed when she recognized the man at the table, and he rose to wrap her in his arms and squeeze her tight despite her bulk.

Elizabeth just let them chat, inching a bit further away from the crease at the far end of the shiny red vinyl bench seat she was sitting on ... unwilling to find out what that brownish-black crud stuck in the crack was without a hazardous materials team standing by. All she knew was that it was not getting anywhere near her $300 rose colored linen skirt.

"Well, I want the country fried steak, Della. And a sweet tea," Frederick said, his arm draped around the woman's ample waist as he returned to his seat and smiled up at her. "Elizabeth?" he asked.

"Salad, low-fat dressing on the side," she requested, trying to keep her upper lip from curling as she spoke. Sometimes it was just hard to be nice for him. For a lawyer, he had some awful friends. "Just bring me water to drink," she added.

"We don't got no low-fat dressing, sugar. How about some nice Thousand Island?" Della asked with a sunny, gap-toothed smile, pulling the stub of a pencil from behind her ear and bringing with it a little snow-shower of yellowed dandruff as she began scribbling on a tattered order pad.

It was all Elizabeth could do to keep from standing up and running out to the Lexus immediately. "That's fine," she murmured, fighting back the nausea. "Just please make sure that they put it on the side. People in restaurants are such idiots."

As the fat woman turned to leave, Elizabeth remembered another pressing issue. "And please bring me some clean silverware."

"That was rude," Frederick announced quietly as Della walked away, disapproval thick in his dark gray eyes.

"I said PLEASE," she snapped in return. "I was TRYING to be nice."

"Your tone of voice said otherwise, Elizabeth. And you don't just call people idiots to their face."

"I didn't call her an idiot. I was making a generalization."

"You said it about people who work in restaurants ... like her. You really don't think before you say things to some people, Elizabeth," he scolded, "especially when you consider them lower than your little circle of plastic friends."

"Let's talk about something else," she interjected quickly, feeling her stress level going up, and rubbing her forehead to keep it from wrinkling. She felt so lightheaded already. All she needed was to pass out and hit the floor in this place.

Imagining what kind of filth was down there was all that was keeping her upright.

"No, we're going to have this discussion," he replied, then paused

as Della returned to the table with their drinks.

Elizabeth took one look at the glass placed in front of her and nearly lost it. "Look at this," she hissed as the obese woman turned and lumbered away from the table, holding up the glass with two fingers and showing Frederick the smudge on it. "Did you bring me here so I could catch the bubonic plague? Anthrax? What?"

"And that's the other thing," he returned, leaning back in the booth and fixing his gaze on her. "You are so obsessive/compulsive. Off the deep end. There's a tiny little speck on that glass ... and you act like it's coated in raw sewage. You've got a real problem, Elizabeth. It rules your life."

"You're just being ridiculous. How can you say that wanting things to be clean is a problem, Frederick? Don't you like it when things are clean?"

"Sure I do. But I don't have panic attacks when they're not."

"Well ... I'm just fastidious," she replied defensively. "My mother was always fastidious."

"Right into an early grave."

"That's not fair, Frederick. My mother was very fragile."

"Your mother worried herself to death ... over nothing ... just like you're doing. I love you, Elizabeth. I don't want to see you do that to yourself. And quite frankly ... I'm sick of listening to it. You were fun when we first met, but now all you do is complain."

She sat in stunned silence as Della returned to their table, bearing a huge plate of greasy food for Frederick, and a wilted salad for her. How dare he speak to her that way? The old woman turned to leave, looking anxiously at the hard expression on Frederick's face, but Elizabeth wasn't about to let her get away right yet. "Where is my clean silverware?" she snipped, picking through the lettuce leaves on her plate with the tips of her fingers and tossing the unsavory looking ones to the side. "Or don't you have any in this dump?"

"That's it, Elizabeth," Frederick sighed. "I'm not going to stick around and watch you insult people who don't meet your standards for the rest of my life. I've got better things to do." He stood and wrapped his arm around the large woman's shoulder for a second, pressing a $50 bill in her hand. "I apologize for my companion, Della. I won't bring her here anymore."

Without another word, he turned and started toward the door.

"I'm sorry, Frederick," Elizabeth whined, scrambling for something to say to make it right.

When he didn't stop, she got desperate. How could he do this? She couldn't let it end this way. They had already begun to plan their

wedding. What would people say?

"Look, Frederick. I'm eating it," she shouted, not caring who heard her. Picking up a piece of lettuce and biting on it, she fought back the urge to gag. "I'm eating it."

He never stopped, simply pushed open the glass door at the end of the line of booths and disappeared out into the night, leaving her watching the gravy congeal on his abandoned plate, and wondering what she was going to do next.

Cub propeller 1
Melissa Tharpe-Tiesi
silver gelatin print

Perpetual Ebb

Patrick LaPollo II

When I drink wine I want to pick fair flowers,

When I pick fair flowers my feet begin to dance,

When I dance I spin in circles,

Spinning circles makes me prance.

Prancing makes me grin,

Grinning makes me laugh,

Laughing makes me sin,

Sinning keeps me busy.

When I'm busy sinning I feel sadness,

And when I'm feeling sad the woe is mine,

This possession makes me thirsty,

And when I'm thirsty I drink wine.

When I look upon this blank

John D. Trainor

When I look upon this blank
and I think of the words
to write of what I see in you,
in reflecting mirrors—
I hesitate
to pollute
the page that stares at me
blankly, innocent, pure
like your autumn eyes that fall like leaves from the heavens,
when I slip into the clothes
that I shrugged off years ago, in past decades,
generations, or lifetimes,
when I was younger…

when we boys would play
baseball,
with hard wooden bats and well-greased gloves,
hunting for wide open space
to experience freedom….
Where girls were not allowed
into complicated games
of offense and defense,
aggression brewing
in pots of naïve testosterone
that were our bodies,
becoming everything
and anything
that our mothers
Nursed in us
since birth
with game after game,
keeping score,
that was once for fun,
but now a necessity
for manhood….

I saw my enemies
lined in opposite colors,
prepared with strategy
for my demise,

but across the field,
in the dug-out of visitor,
rooting for your brother,
friend, or boyfriend,
I caught the flash
that was your eyes

...and fell into a blank page,
where words were never to be written
to describe a world

that was you.

Sinclair #2
Cara L. Wade
silver gelatin print

Sleep Walkers

Renae Tanner

Back away from me—you foggy fools
Wake up to the coffee you don't taste
And press on through your pillow lives
With fading smiles and worn out bodies
Pushing further into nothingness
Wondering why—all the while
Or
Perhaps you never wondered—
Never searching for the answer to anything
Except monotony's smile—and the next good feeling
No matter who it sacrifices
As long as
It's one more level up
As you rest asleep all your lives
Never penetrating the surface of your core
Just okay with being empty
Just okay with the zombie life
Of work and sleep and brain wash
Clearing your head
Because all day you've been talking trash
About people you don't truly know anyway
Wrong style—wrong way
When you don't even know your own way

Wake up for once
And rest—in the darkness of your being
Look at the shadows you invoke
And question everything
From reality to the one you're trapped in
And when you wake
Perhaps the whole world will feel lighter
Lifted by the flight of your burden—

And you can begin again—on your own path
As a thinking being
Instead of a robot being—
Led to death—

Loneliness
Lisa Morekis
silver gelatin print

Instinct

Elizabeth Pferschy

Sleep under the crook of my arm,
breathe water with the rest of us.

Gently remember who you are.
The water on the window
Feels so cold, but the rabbit
has warm flesh

Come begging, And I will
Suckle you
And cover you with
My hair

-warm,
Warm inside
Close to beating waters
And a tightened grip.

untitled
Mike Rios
pen & ink

Echo

Hal Thomas

Footsteps resound in the empty halls
paved with cheap linoleum
And against cinder block walls
adorned with industrial galvanized sea green paint.

Opaque plastic window panes
blot out the sun's bright rays,
And wads of paper, dust-bunnies, and a
rapidly decaying banana peel enhance the
Abandonment.

Phantom voices shatter the silence,
whispering remembrances
of the myriad of things
passed here,
Reverberating from wall to ceiling
to floor to wall and back again.

Nest

Renae Tanner

Strange!?
Nothing is near me—
No crazy fixation
Of him—or her—
No revelation
Splashing me in the face—
No questioning eyes for
Me to contemplate my being upon—
No anger need be released—
And no love conjured
To its receiver—
I must perform
No unique duty of being—
Only being who I am—
No one waiting for my reply
About every manipulated thought
They have &
Neither do I seek out
A companion to bounce
My skirt or mind upon—
I am sitting here
Realizing—
No energy exists—
For or against anyone
To or from anyone—
All is suited well
And well away from me
All is—
I am feeling nothing—
A beloved feeling
I have always strived
To stray from—
But it is so wise and
Easily planted
In the shell debris

Of my within—and
Each shell is
Strategically placed
In this within—
I am content
Holding nothing
But my head up—
I only question—why
It took me so
Long to get here—

Hole in the Wall
Lauren Ashley
silver gelatin print

Dreams

Marcus Smith

Sinking through the cracking sunrise vault
Captured images drain through the dayspring
Like dead lives rising, brought forth and killed,
Calmed down and drunk in my thin veined seas,
And though the death be long and forsaken,
The life mourns till the lion-eye opens dead
And image converges with object
And all is lost in creation. And all is lost in creation.

Deep redolenting mourning sleep, the sleep
Like babies milk Rotten, sleep, which numbs
Like butterflies wings, me still in the indolent creeping
Of my motionless soul. These dreams though lost
And shaken away like brown cackles in the summer solstice
sun
Dream down to the cloudless sky of green grown.

And that one lost that now comes, now comes
Like the cockleshells once whole and broken,
Once saint and confessional, once dead to the dead place
Now live for the living and lives like the twirling songs
An octave above thunder, in the hinterlands of the dreaming,
In the hinterlands of the song.

The Avalanche Recovery

Dan Van Brunt

My name is Todd Jacob Spencer. I'm twenty-two years old, but I'll probably never see my twenty-third birthday. In fact, I give myself less than a couple days, as cold as it is. I wish I had put that pack up here in the cab instead of in the bed of the truck, because there was enough food in there to last awhile. I've got some food—a couple of candy bars that I found in the glove box, and all the snow a body could ever want for water. I'm starting to think that the cold will definitely get me first, although it really doesn't matter, because I could never have enough food to last me until spring, which is when I'll probably be found.

You see, I was caught in an avalanche a few hours ago while driving down service road 19, which leads from Big Craggy Mt. to Winthrop, Washington, and nobody knows that I'm up here. That sucker really caught me unawares—one minute I'm driving along, next minute—it was like the hand of some giant just picked me up and I was swept away, rolling down the side of the mountain.

I haven't gone into shock, I don't think, which is pretty amazing because my arm doesn't work—I think my shoulder is dislocated. It hurts like somebody jamming a steel rod into the bone of my arm when I move it, so I won't be digging out of here. It's amazing I wasn't hurt worse. I guess seatbelts do save lives, or in this case, extend them. Anyway, I came to rest after what seemed like ages of tossing and rolling, and so here I am, buried alive. I'm sitting upright in the truck, which must be upright as well in relation to the ground, because when I dropped my glove out of my shaking hand, it fell on the floorboard.

I've been told that avalanches don't often occur this time of year around here, so who'd have thought that I'd be the lucky recipient of one? An avalanche in November—what a joke. Well, I'm going to get it together enough to tell my story, so that I won't die from fright, anyway. Whoever finds me will, I hope, forward this story of mine to my loved ones, my uncle first of all, but I'm mostly writing for myself. They say that writing can be cathartic in times when you are under a lot of stress. Well, I'm not under a lot of stress, but I am under a lot of snow—and I guess that's close enough. My mind feels stretched to the breaking point of reality, and it's as if I can actually see the credits rolling on my life.

This laptop of mine was along for the ride, since I carry it everywhere. I don't know how it wasn't damaged, and I don't know how long it will work before the cold gets to it, but it seems fine now. I'll save this to disc when I'm done, and keep it in my jacket so It'll be found—kind of like a voice from the grave. Well, here goes; background first.

I'm not originally from this area; in fact I'm only visiting. My uncle, Hatch Spencer—my father's older brother—runs the store down in Winthrop, and every year while I was growing up my folks sent me up to work in the store with my uncle. I hadn't been back up here since the summer before I graduated high school, about five years ago. Once I joined the Army, I was on my own and didn't have time for this place or my uncle anymore. And, even though I didn't want to admit it for awhile, I missed

coming up here, I missed the store, the town, and the mountains—especially, though, and I missed Glenn and Emily. Well, I'll come back to them eventually. Anyway, I went into the Army, against my parents' wishes, of course. They had my life planned from the get-go. Like I said, they had me coming up here every summer, usually for about two months of my break, then it was back to the boarding school outside of Atlanta that I went to my whole childhood. My folks sent me up here to "diversify" me, they said, but I really think it was because they didn't know what to do with me when school was out. I saw them at Christmas for a couple of weeks, and a couple of weeks in the summer when I was around the house before and after my trips up here, but other than that, we had little contact.

But, they had their ideas about where I was supposed to be headed in life. I had excellent grades—Hell, I had nothing better to do—in a boarding school they pretty much absolve you of your spare time, you know. And my folks made me apply to all the right schools. My father was new money; he had made it big with IBM as a creative consultant, and he has a huge office in the IBM building down in Atlanta. His family is from Seattle, and my grandparents still live there. Only his brother, my uncle Hatch, is crazy enough to live out in the mountains. Sometimes I think though, that my uncle is a bigger success in life than my father is—even though he has not made any money to speak of. At least he's happy here.

Anyway, my mom is another story altogether. She is old money, honey, and don't you forget it. I think that the only reason she married my father was because the Beaumont family fortune was almost gone, but she would rather marry into new money than get stuck selling the house, or worse, getting a job. She is from Savannah, and around there she is like a baroness, a lady of title. People kiss her ass at parties, and all that stuff. It really made me kind of sick, but I wouldn't mind being at one of those cotillions or whatever right now. Hell, I'd gladly swap places with one of those old phonies right now if I could.

Well, enough about my parents. Even though I got accepted at several fine schools, including MIT (Math is my specialty) I decided to throw them all a curve and enlist in the Army instead. My scores were right off the charts; I could have gotten any job I wanted. I chose to work on tanks. Finally, here was a job that interested me. I even drove a huge tracked vehicle, especially designed to tow tanks. Have you ever seen those big wreckers that tow semis? Those things are Tonka trucks by comparison. It was a fun job, and I made a lot of friends who didn't care if I knew so-and-so, or where I went to school. In the end, I got out because I wanted to explore a little. I needed to find out what I was going to do with my life. I mean, the Army was fun, but not a career for me. And there was this place. Always I thought about Winthrop and my uncles' store, where I had most of my good memories. I needed to come back up here, because this is the only place that I have felt at home in my entire life.

My uncle's store is in a building in the middle of town, on the only corner that has a red light. It's a two-story brick affair, and it is one of the most important in town. Winthrop is so small that the general store is more than just a store, it's a town meeting place. My uncle is one of the most important people because of this, and since he loves the town, he loves his position. The store has a cluster of tables up front, near the windows that overlook Olympia Street. The old-timers hang out there all day, playing

checkers and dominoes, gossiping about the goings-on in town, the weather, and anything else they can think of. Uncle Hatch has a satellite, and a big TV that he switches back and forth from the Weather Channel to CNN all day. In Winthrop, if you want the news, be it local or national, you go to uncle Hatch's store.

The store itself sprawls across the entire lower floor, and it's got just about everything. Most of the store is given over to groceries, but he also has a small but well-stocked auto parts counter, some basic hardware and plumbing supplies, and several shelves of movies for rent. In the winters, which come on quick and hard and linger for months, this store is a lifeline to the outside world for the nine hundred or so residents of Winthrop.

Uncle Hatch lives upstairs, in a cozy series of rooms that he has, over time, made into quite a nice place. There is a great room, which takes up half the space, with the fireplace in the corner, a huge kitchen, and three bedrooms, one of which is mine. My uncle is a life-long bachelor, but he has a great many friends who are always coming to visit, so his house is always full of life. In the summers of my childhood, I can remember there always being somebody either staying there with us, or calling on us for a while.

Uncle Hatch was in Vietnam, and several of his Army buddies came to stay over the years, more when I was small than now. I can remember being packed off to bed early on the nights that they would come. I've never seen my uncle drink, and I think that's because I stayed in bed when he sent me there on those particular nights.

Well, it's time to come back around to Glenn and Emily now; after I give a little background on them, I'll be able to tell the story of how I wound up driving up to Big Craggy on this particular Wednesday in November. Glenn and Emily Watson were an elderly couple who worked for my uncle. My uncle runs the place, does the books, helps customers, and all that stuff. Glenn, a big, husky man in his sixties, did a lot of the physical stuff like unloading and stocking shelves. He worked about twelve hours a day in that store—always did. No matter how many times my uncle told him to take some time off, or tried to hire some young kids to help with all the work, Glenn would never waver. He knew everything about the inventory, and also had an uncanny ability to remember shipment dates and what box came on what truck.

But his defining characteristic was his skill as a woodsman—having lived his whole life in the mountains of Washington he was steeped in mountain lore. Many times when I was a boy he took me out into the woods, where he showed me his world. It was probably the best time of my life, the excursions into the deep forests around the National Park up near the Canadian border. We'd spend whole weekends camping, fishing, and hiking all through the Cascades during the summers of my youth.

Emily is Glenn's wife, and the love of his life. They have never spent more than a couple days apart, only when Glenn went into the mountains would they be separated. Miss Emily also works for my uncle, cleaning the store and his apartments, cooking for him, giving the place a womanly touch. She is also in her sixties now, and she, until recently at least, kept the place in order. She is slow, not full-blown mentally retarded, but definitely not of normal intelligence. She cannot drive—in fact she is

usually terrified of cars unless Glenn's with her. That kind of sums her up, in fact. If Glenn's nearby, she functions well, if a little erratically sometimes. If he's not around, or she hasn't heard his voice for awhile, she'll get jumpy, crying out until he answers her. She wasn't quite so bad about this when I was growing up, but unfortunately she's gotten quite a bit worse while I was away in the Army. This year when I arrived, I couldn't believe the change the years had made.

She's quite a bit more nervous than she used to be, and I guess that's why Glenn had not gone out into the woods for one of his two or three-day camping trips for awhile. I bet she started to get a little whiney whenever he started to get out his lantern, or brought his sleeping bag out to air on the balcony rail. I've been here visiting for a couple weeks, and was getting ready to take my leave, before the snows really started, making it harder to get out of town. Then, last Friday, Glenn asked me if I wouldn't mind helping my uncle watch Emily for him, because he was dying to get up into the woods before winter set in.

"She thinks the world of you, Todd," he said to me. "She'll be alright with you and your uncle around to keep an eye on her. I ain't been out there for almost two years, and I really need some time up there in the big quiet, if you know what I mean."

I did know exactly what he meant, and I thought then, and now, that he was one of the most long-suffering and patient men I've ever met. If anybody deserved some time away from his demanding job and beloved if high-maintenance wife, it was Glenn Watson. So I said sure, I'd do it, and my only regret is that I wasn't invited along, even though I knew why I wasn't.

Well, Glenn didn't take long to get ready, he always camped light, only taking whatever he could carry on his back—which was a lot, by the way—and once he made his plans to go on his two-day excursion he was ready by the following morning. Saturday morning. When he threw his pack into the back of his old Jeep CJ-5 and took off out of Winthrop, headed up to county road 19, (where I met my avalanche today), it was the last time anybody but me saw him alive.

The weather turned ugly on Sunday night, and we all started to worry about old Glenn. He was an extremely competent woodsman, true, but he was also way past his prime, and hadn't been up in the mountains for awhile. Anyway, that night was bad. The wind was really whipping and the snow came on at about seven-thirty in what was our first big snow this season. As my uncle and I took turns holding and comforting Emily, we also kept in touch with a couple of the game wardens that Glenn has known all his life. Those guys, Smythe and Tibbet are their names, should get some kind of commendation. They picked up on our fears immediately and turned out a full search based entirely on our concerns. Well, they looked from the next morning, that's this past Monday, until this morning, Wednesday, and they have called in helicopters and observation planes from as far away as Seattle and Boise. Like I said, Uncle Hatch and I are grateful to those two park rangers for all their help, but in the end, Glenn didn't need all those folks' help after all.

Well, I'd better hurry and wrap this story up, because I just fainted or something for a minute there, actually I have no idea for how long I was under. It's so dark and cold in here. My computer screen is lighting up

most of the cab of this old truck—most of it. There's one corner over on the passenger floorboard that is still pretty dark, but not dark enough for me, not by a long shot.

You see, by this morning, Uncle Hatch and I realized that those guys with all their equipment and know-how weren't having any luck, and they'd be forced to give up by the end of the week, when the weather is supposed to get a lot worse. The last snowstorm, the one that caught Glenn, only ended last night, so they haven't really been able to search very thoroughly yet. Anyway, I talked Uncle Hatch into letting me use his truck to head up here and see if I could find Glenn on my own. I know where he likes to go, and I had a hunch, it turns out a correct one—about where Glenn would hole up in case a big storm hit.

The old cabin was favorite spot of mine when I was small, and I can remember Glenn saying that it would be a good place to get to in case we ever got separated. Well, when I told those rangers that, they just said that somebody had already been over there to check. It really isn't a hard place to get to from my now-favorite road, county #19. It's only a short two miles from the road up where it goes through the pass to the north of Big Craggy. So I headed out this morning, and it took me the better part of the day to get up there, the snow was so thick. Twice I got stopped by state troopers, telling me that my help wasn't needed in the search and all that, but I just went around 'em and their roadblocks, which never block all the logging roads anyway, and kept heading up here.

I got to the cabin at about three this afternoon (I just remembered that although my watch was broken during the avalanche, my computer has a clock in it—I just checked it—it's still Wednesday, but not for much longer.) Anyway, at first, I thought that my time had been wasted, because there was no sign of Glenn anywhere. If he had been there, the recent snow wiped clean any trace of his passing. The deputy who had checked the cabin had thoughtfully put a note on the door to let Glenn know, should he happen past it, to let us in on where he was, since everyone was looking for him and all.

Well, I was pretty discouraged and was about to leave when a strange thing happened. I had a feeling right then that I wasn't alone. I felt more than I heard Glenn call for help, down at the bottom of the well.

The old cabin had a (thankfully) shallow well sunk in it's back yard. In the mountains, with natural fresh water everywhere, it's pretty rare to see such wells. In essence they are just small scooped out areas, usually no more than fifteen feet deep, and about four feet across. Dug to that depth up here, a well can give you an inexhaustible supply of fresh water, without your having to walk to the nearest stream or spring. Anyway, there is a well there, and Glenn had fallen in it on his way to the safety of the cabin. Of course he knew right where it was, but it was covered by the snow and he was tired and disoriented enough that he stepped right into it. He was almost all the way at the bottom, about twelve feet down. He'd gotten wedged in tight by his heavy pack and was too weak to get himself out. In the end, I almost couldn't get him out either. It took me all my strength to get him unstuck, and the better part of an hour to pull him up, using some ropes the rangers left in the cabin, which they kept stocked as an emergency ranger station.

Once I got him out, I looked him over, not liking what I saw in the

slightest. He was alive, but not in good shape. He had frostbite on his face, and one hand from which he had lost the glove was so frostbitten I winced just looking at it. He would lose those fingers, probably. But, he'd eaten plenty of snow and ice, and even had wiggled some jerky out of his pocket and so was still semi-coherent, anyway. I checked the cabin for a short wave set, but no luck there. We'd have to walk out. I didn't want to leave him; he was in and out of consciousness and I was worried that once he drifted off, he might be lost forever. We stumbled all the way to the truck, me half-carrying him, with his pack on my back. He was an amazingly resilient man, that's for sure. I still can't believe that he made it. So it was that we came to the truck, and I threw his pack into the back, and swung him into the passenger's seat. I ran around to the driver's side, got in, and fired it up, kicking the heater on as soon as I could. We still had a little drive in front of us, so I reached for my seatbelt out of habit, then thought about Glenn. Should I put his on him as well? I looked over at him. He was sort of awake, making a weird noise in his throat, like a moan. The pain of his injuries was most likely going to keep him awake now, especially once that heater came on strong. I hesitated another minute, then let it go, buckling myself in before flooring it and roaring down the track towards the road.

I guess that whoever it is that is reading this knows that Glenn is with me here in the truck, he has been all the time. I saved him, only to lead him to another death. That avalanche caught us not twenty minutes after I decided not to buckle him in. He's laying down on the passenger floorboards, face turned upwards in a horrible deathmask, eyes wide, frozen tongue lolling. I wish I could move my damn shoulder enough to just reach down and turn his head.

Well, that's my story. I'm getting really cold now, so maybe it won't be long. I thought about adding little personal notes to my folks and everybody here, but I think maybe I'll just let this baby ride the way she is.

Hidden River
Cindy Nielubowicz
silver gelatin print

Conversation:

Hal Thomas

Soul's communion
Lost spoken art
Information exchange
Doorway to the heart,

Mind's eye conversion
Lips' words attempt
To picture-perfect paint
But at best, circumvent.

The Tenement Landlord

Michele Fox

Sometimes I feel like this house,
Old and scarred from years of abuse and neglect.
The doormat . . . used, worn out,
walked all over.
The window . . . transparent,
always looked right through.
Th lights . . . flickering, dim,
have lost their shine.
The door . . . rusted shut,
from tears that fell like rain.
The attic . . . dusty, cobwebs,
holds lost memories of another time.
A fresh coat of paint can disguise the house on the outside,
but the soul is still black and blue.

untitled
R. Nicole Hilliard
silver gelatin print, sepia tone

Stairs
Bonnie Kizer
silver gelatin print

1899
Niki Weber
color photograph

untitled
Charlie Parker
hand-colored photograph

Worthy of Love

David Seckinger

I suppose you already know that Paul wrote about love in the Bible (and what he said about it was true) and Plato wrote about love in Symposium (and what he said was also true). Now it's my turn. But I'll warn you before I begin, try to keep an open mind. If you cannot or will not, you might be offended, but your reaction makes little difference to me. To be honest, I didn't write this for you. Great literature tells us that Petrarch loved Laura; Dante, Beatrice; and Shakespeare, the dark lady. I loved Amanda as truly as any of these, and anyone who disputes this probably knows more about books than love.

The whole affair happened years ago. At the time, I worked as a security guard, night watchman, for Phil Sidney's Chevrolet. It was a great job for a kid fresh out of high school. I worked five nights a week. The car lot would be closed and the salesmen gone by the time I got there, so I worked alone, if you want to call it work. Basically, my job consisted of staying awake while normal people slept. Located beside the dealership was Kresthill's, a fast food restaurant. The place never closed, which was great for me. I was already a regular there when Amanda started. I remember the first thing she ever said to me.

"Can I help you?"

I didn't see it then, but I do now. You have to understand; there are no coincidences in life. Granted, sometimes things happen and we were never meant to know the reasons why, but if we just paid closer attention to the insignificant events, they might give us that glimpse of insight we all desire. It didn't take long for Amanda and me to start talking, but just talk. It's funny; there's something inside a person that wants to make a familiar face a friendly one. And Amanda always wore the nicest smile. She was neon in the darkness, hard to resist. Instead of a neon smile, I wore a SecureForce uniform, no gun included. After a while, Amanda asked about my job:

"So you work at the car lot?"

"Yeah."

"So what do you do over there?"

"I guard the cars."

"So has anybody ever tried to steal one of those cars?"

"No."

"So then tell me, what do you do over there?"

"You really want to know?"

"If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't ask."

"Well, I can't tell you in here because it's top secret, but if you come over, I'll show you."

"That's okay. I'm not that curious."

Curious? I suppose you already know the cliche about the cat. I knew a little about dead cats and dead cliches, but still couldn't help myself. I tried to be sensible and consider the facts. Amanda had one obvious obstacle, a wedding ring. Amanda wore the gold band but told us she wasn't happy. "I'm getting out of it soon," she said regularly, but more to herself than any of us. There were other problems. Amanda was a grown woman, and I was eighteen, skinny framed with a boyish air that even a uniform couldn't hide. Finally, like Shakespeare and his dark lady, our complexions didn't match. Amanda was black, but don't expect me to describe her skin as chocolate, sable, coal, or coffee. I'll let poets turn women into "beautiful objects." And I know that race shouldn't matter in affairs of the heart, but it honestly does, because even affairs of the heart are subject to the outside world. However, in spite of all our obstacles, love managed to discover the two of us.

Amanda and I drew closer. We spent many a lonely night together, wasting each other's time, earning pocket change. We always kept company from 3 to 4 am. That's the suicide hour, in case you don't know. A person's best defense is to sleep through that hour because that's when your hidden fears come to visit and whisper in your ear. If you can't sleep, you'd better make a friend. Take it from one who knows. Too many lonely nights struggling through the suicide hour can wear anybody down. If my nights weren't bad enough, I soon found my days were haunted, too. My sleep became troubled. Erotic visions roamed through my mind, disturbing my sleep, and dreams caged me in their labyrinthine ways. . .

I am a child walking through the woods. Young pines cast long shadows under the heavy sun. Hazy orange fills the void, broken by descending, yellow beams shooting through the treetops. Naked women slowly race from tree to tree, coyishly giggling in cloistering echos. And I am a child again, but more than a child. Light guides me, and the presence of angelic companions, graceful, ethereal, satisfies my desire without inflicting love's sad satiety. The unworn path ends at a clearing, where an old gypsy woman stokes a campfire. As I approach, she looks up and declares, "In the fire, this is yours." And in the eye of the blaze, between flame and ash, the face of the devil watches over me, waiting. . .

I told Amanda about my dreams. "Sounds like witches to me," she said.

"What do you mean, it sounds like witches?"

"If a person is secretly in love with you, then a witch will come and ride you in your dreams."

Amanda smiled at me.

"What are you telling me? You mean a witch, a real witch, is riding me like a broom?"

"No Honey, not like a broom. Like a man. A witch will get you hard or a woman wet, and the witch will ride you. That's why you're having bad dreams. The witch makes you have those dreams to keep you in a deep sleep. The longer you sleep, the longer it rides."

"You mean a real witch is having sex with me while I'm sleeping?"

"Yes," she said, "you're susceptible. Do this the next time you wake up from one of those dreams: look to the foot of your bed. When you wake up, a witch jumps to the foot of your bed to hide. It waits to see if you go back to sleep. But you must look the moment you wake up because witches are very fast."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I do too. I know all about love, and I got the scars to prove it."

"Oh yeah? Can I see?"

"Honey, you don't want to. Believe me."

And I did believe her. You could argue that she was wrong, that witches don't exist. Most everybody would agree with you, but before we go any further, I want to clarify one thing. People tend to confuse facts with the truth, but often the two are not the same. Most people believe that truth is merely an accumulation of facts; however, this isn't altogether true. Sometimes the facts get in the way of the truth, and sometimes it's easier to see the truth by lying. You might think I'm wrong, but take for example, Aesop's Fables, which have nothing to do with facts but a good deal to do with the truth. It was the same with Amanda. Maybe her facts were questionable, but she believed what she said. She wasn't lying, and I could put my faith in that. Personally, I'll trust honesty before evidence.

My job grew more boring, and I grew braver, spending more time at Kresthill's and less time protecting the flock (that's what we called the cars). Amanda was more fun to watch, anyway. She eventually told me her story: she grew up in rural Georgia on a small farm with a big family. A handsome stranger wooed and married her, and she left the farm, but he quickly changed, becoming abusive, until one day he dragged her up a flight of stairs by her arm, so she left him. Soon after that she met her current husband, a man who had a good job and a nice home, who didn't drink, and who desperately loved her. Amanda said he was scrawny and ugly, but that was okay with her; she wouldn't have to worry about other women too much. She also told me about their great sex. Apparently, he had a big dick, really big, and she really liked it. Amanda claimed that dick was God's way of compensating for those pitiful looks. Amanda said they

had a good marriage, but she didn't love him.

Amanda told me her birthday was coming, so I bought her a teddy bear with black button eyes and soft fur. The night before her birthday, I asked her where she lived. She didn't even bat an eye: "1551 East 64th Street. Why do you want to know?"

"Maybe I want to visit you sometime."

"My husband wouldn't like that."

After work, I drove to Amanda's house. Nobody answered the knock on the door, so I left the bear on her steps and went home. That night, Amanda told me about finding the gift. She called it "cute." She played with it all morning and took it to bed with her.

"Are you the one who brought the bear?" she asked.

"Yeah, do you really like it?"

"Yes Honey, I like it. I thought it was you."

"You thought it was me?"

"Yes, I thought it was you that left the bear."

"Oh."

It was me for the next two weeks. It took every bit of my willpower to stay at work. If I wanted to see Amanda, I had to go to Kresthill's. She wouldn't set foot in the car lot, but every moment with her was worth the risk. One night Amanda said after work she was going home to have a drink and asked me to join her. She instructed me not to show until a quarter past seven. I gently knocked upon her door at 7:23. Seconds later a dead bolt lock clicked, and I could hear the tumblers fall into place. Amanda let me in and gave me a beer. We talked a little, just like so many nights at Kresthill's but not really. We were alone now. I was nursing my beer when Amanda rabbited across the room, saying she wanted to watch a movie. She put a tape in the vcr, turned on the tv. The screen flickered. Our bloodshot eyes fixated on the set. Background music kept the beat. Amanda touched the back of my neck. "Relax," she said, "I hope this doesn't bother you."

It didn't. A man's mouth sweeping over soft skin, a pink tongue, a thin trail, hands working inside a shirt, fingers fumbling with a bra, screen flickering in a hot embrace, voices pleading, background music keeping the beat, clenched fists struggling with a shoe, a foot removing pants, a flickering screen keeping the beat, a woman's mouth sweeping over soft skin. By the time she had me naked, I was just getting her pants unzipped. Amanda stood up and undressed herself. I fell to my knees and grabbed her. "No," she said, "not like that." Amanda pushed me on the couch and crawled on top of me like I owed her money and she wanted it back. She pinned me down and closed her eyes; she wouldn't be denied. Every thrust fell harder, more deliberate. Amanda wrapped her arms around my head. She had a

better grip that way. Her face was buried in my shoulder. Her hot breath. Her sweaty body. She gasped for air, gasped for air, gasped for air, air, air, air, air. Then she stopped. Her chest was heavy, and her belly quivered. She raised up and looked me in the eye.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you okay? Why didn't you come?"

I just looked at her. I didn't know what to say.

"Roll over," she said.

We rolled over and tried, but it wasn't any good. There was no rhythm, just frustrated pounding. I started getting mad. I had something to prove. Amanda told me to get up. She said I was trying too hard. She told me to get dressed. I asked for a second chance.

"Maybe later. Now go home."

I really didn't want to go, but she insisted, so I went home. Believe it or not, the drive home that morning was nice. It really didn't matter about not finishing. On the inside I was satisfied. The world looked pretty damn good, and I felt like a man. That night, Amanda acted sweet and smiled but played it cool like nothing had happened, so I did too. But she had changed, stopped talking about her husband, seemed kind of vacant, lost a little of her shine. Amanda left her husband about a month later and Kresthill's too. I walked in one night and asked where she was. The woman behind the counter said Amanda left her husband and wasn't coming back to Kresthill's. I almost asked how to reach her, but I stopped. A voice in my head said, "Let it go."

Amanda must have wanted a clean break, a complete change. And I could understand that. Even I changed a little, an unexpected miracle, turning to books (instead of another waitress) to keep me company during the lonely nights and suicide hours. At the time, no woman could have replaced Amanda, anyway. But I acquired a book called Franny and Zooey, which not only occupied my time but comforted me, too. I don't know if I really understood the story entirely, but it sure understood me. It told me, "Honey, don't worry yourself too much about what happened, because sometimes- not always, but sometimes- love looks like an unholy thing."

And that's how it ended. You could argue that this isn't much of a love story. You might call it a pathetic example of show and tell. Of course, you're entitled to your opinion, but don't judge too harshly. Amanda and I were real, and I haven't tried to turn our love story into a fairy tale. Everybody knows that now-a-days Jack and Jill last from three to five years before selling the castle and calling it quits. That's how fairy tales end, with a U-haul trailer and friends taking sides. But go ahead and judge if you

want. You'd probably be justified, maybe. Maybe it wasn't real love. Maybe it was just the best we could do at the time. I'm not making excuses. I know the Ten Commandments and the difference between right and wrong. But in spite of our fall, love somehow managed to discover us. "What love?" you ask. "Where was the love?" That's the amazing thing about love. Sometimes it looks like hate or pride or even lust. If you don't believe me, look it up. Great minds have written all about love, and most of them understood it. You see, love is usually easy to define because it takes many forms, and because it takes many forms, love is often hard to recognize. That's one lesson literature teaches. But I suppose there are some things you can't learn from a book. Some things you just have to figure out for yourself.

Bogie & Bacall
Mike Rios
pen & ink

Bead Man
Cara L. Wade
silver gelatin print

i am through apologizing

John D. Trainor

i am through apologizing
for words
that i line in rows
of imagination and random points
of my subconscious
trying to form meaning to my existence
i don't know why
that old man poet
rambled about termites
eating, digesting
nothing,
for nothing's sake,
poetry for poets
and preaching to the choir,
the unholiest degradation in the face
of your god
that you piss your talent
for incoherence and jargon
for deep thinkers.
are you alive?
did you see her smile?
or the way you grimaced
when i asked the question?

Rock Crevice
Chris Harper
silver gelatin print

Night of the Living Dead

Fred Peterson

Doug was surrounded. He didn't have to turn around to see the killers behind him. He could feel them: the old polyester couples hovering around the public garden like senile sharks in a kiddie pool, all puffed, pouchy faces, and dingy gray hair and short bluish perms, and fat hanging off the arms (white arms with bruised, purple veins and clumsy, shaky hands), and wheezing in the heat, and stale sweat, and garishly-colored synthetic shirts and slacks hissing ceaselessly, insidiously, under the July sun. It's Night of the Living Dead, he thought. They haven't smelled me yet. But they will. Any minute now they'll eat my brains, I'll gain a hundred pounds and seventy years, my clothes will become Montgomery Ward circa 1975 and I'll start circling the park, grunting and coughing at the flowers. I'll be one of them.

From his bench in the shade, Doug could see the parking lot filling. More gigantic American cars spewing out more of the shuffling geriatric mob. Reinforcements. Oh, God.

Chickens, Doug decided. Not sharks but chickens. Evil chickens. He pictured them huddled together in some rural, shit-covered coop, the pale, pimpled skin showing under their thinning feathers, clucking a low, toxic cluck, preening contentedly and waiting for Sunday. Today.

And Doug couldn't leave. Couldn't go home, anyway. Not until the acid wore off. He sat on the bench, his t-shirt stuck to his back, and felt the sweat roll down his face.

The trip had started out smoothly enough. He and Ed, his best friend and drug buddy, had dropped around noon and sat around Ed's place listening to music until it went 3-D and it was time to head to the park and goof on all the weirdness there.

Just as they were heading out the door, though, Mrs. Bowens, Ed's landlord, showed up to talk about Ed's leaking toilet. They managed to be polite, smiled at the right places, but Mrs. Bowens ("Call me Janice") liked to talk, and Doug could feel her sucking the energy out of the room, out of him and Ed, while she went on about some problem with the tenant across the hall. The lights dimmed. She was a vampire. She was lulling them.

The real trouble started when Doug let it slip that he was going to be looking for his own place soon and Mrs. Bowens, after asking his price

range, insisted on showing him a basement apartment right then and there. There was no way out now. Ed waited while Doug mutely followed her down the stairs, tuning out her shrill jabber about the low cost of utilities, expecting her to turn and attack.

She swung open the door, they stepped in, and it was all he could do to keep from running away. The first thing to hit him was the smell, the stench of cat piss, years of it soaked into the brown shag carpet. He was surprised his shoes didn't squish. The room itself was tiny, just big enough to fit a bed or a couch and a dresser. The kitchen consisted of a small oven/stove combo and a sink next to it on the wall facing them. No counter. Through the open bathroom door he saw a faded blue shower curtain dotted with mold. The ceiling was low and dirty, with a single fixture in the center. One of the bulbs was out. Doug was almost grateful.
Overwhelming sorrow and dread flooded through him. Was this what his life was coming to? Would he end up here or worse? This isn't an apartment, he thought. This is a deathbed. This is suicide. This is where you don't even bother leaving a note because no one cares. This is a fistful of pills and a revolver.

He quickly mumbled a thanks, bolted up the steps to the front door, and headed for the park. Sorry, Ed, he thought. I'll explain later.
So he sat in the shade, hiding from the blinding black sunlight, hiding from the circling dead, riding it out. He was not a quitter. He was not a quitter.

Flower Power
Dori Gann
silver gelatin print

December 14th

Elaine Hakala

Life has been so busy for me recently; the date crept up on me before I realized it. When I glanced at the calendar today, I realized that it's been a year since my grandmother died.

She was my dad's mother, and the last grandparent I had. Her name was Evie Louise ... born in 1903, the youngest of nine children. Her family was never really rich, but they did the best with what they had. They lived on a 200 acre farm in the north Georgia hills, held together by past generations of her family since before the Civil War. Her husband, my grandfather, bought it from them during the Depression when times got hard, just to keep it in the family.

From one sunny afternoon in my childhood, I remember the huge, old clapboard house she was born in. One floor. Sprawling. Pointed and rusty tin roof. No electricity. The bathroom outside in a little house with a half moon on the door. The kitchen in a shed out back, too ... in case of fire from the old wood stove. I don't think the entire house ever had a lick of paint on it. It was completely empty the day I saw it. No one had lived in it for years since my grandparents moved to town. The sound of my quiet footsteps echoed against the walls as I crept through the rooms while the grownups were all outside. Scratched plank floors held together with pegs. Sooted stone fireplaces. I could almost see my grandmother and her brothers and sisters playing there when they were kids. I remember bits and pieces of my one and only visit there, shortly before that old house was torn down, but the thing I remember most about it was that it was big despite the fact that there was almost nothing left of it.

Of course, everything's big when you're six or seven.

My grandmother was also very big to me at that age, and we always had fun together. I remember holding her hand and looking up at her in her white uniform. She looked like a nurse to me, but she was really the lunchroom manager at an elementary school. I've got a school picture of her from 1954, dressed that way. Every time I look at it, it reminds me of the smell of cinnamon rolls and spaghetti, the sound of big pots and pans banging together, and of female laughter as she and all her helpers put together sustenance for starving minds and bodies in that steaming kitchen. She certainly knew her way around a stove, and she taught me more about cooking than anyone else in my life.

She also tried to teach me how to play the old pump organ in her living room, the one her father bought for her when she was seven for fifty

dollars, second-hand. A small fortune at the time. It was even older than she was, and she was already ancient in my eyes. It was sound, but scratched and well used. Several of the chord stops were stuck open, and most of the cloth covering the inside of the open scrollwork was gone. It was, and still is beautiful, but I was never any good at playing it. I just liked to climb up on the stool and pump the pedals so I could hear the moan it made. It made great haunted house noises for me, but my grandmother could make it sing. I remember her legs pumping and her fingers flying over the keys. Her favorite songs were hymns, especially "In the Wildwood," but there was one she called "Moonshine," a rollicking, bawdy tune much more fitting a saloon than a church choir.

I always wondered where she learned that one, but I never asked her.

I also never asked her why she and my grandfather separated when I was two. They never divorced. She just moved three blocks down the street into another house they owned and never spoke to him again. I remember my mother having to try and remember which one she had invited to the last family get-together as another one rolled around ... because the two of them refused to be in the same house together.

They were both hard-headed.

That's probably where I got it from.

Because of my own hard-headedness, I drifted away from my grandmother during my teen years, just like I did from the rest of my family. I knew everything. They knew nothing. I thought I had all the answers ... only because I hadn't heard all the questions yet. And when I came back as a young woman, I discovered that my grandmother had changed. By then I could look down on the head of the woman who towered over me when I was a child. I'd grown taller, but she had begun to shrink as well. Arthritis had begun to wear her down after she retired. Her posture was stooped, and getting worse every year. Her gait slowed, and then she needed the assistance of a walker.

But her mind was still good. Every day for her meant morning coffee with the crossword puzzle in the paper, something she was very good at, then spending the day in her rocking chair, crocheting and watching soap operas. A little lunch at noon. A little supper at six. Friday and Saturday nights she'd play cards with friends. On Sunday, she'd watch church services on TV.

She loved her life. Those small things made her content.

We spent lots of time talking then, whenever I could get the chance, my daughter playing at our feet. I'd let her supervise me making her a German chocolate cake while we talked about life, and she'd listen to my

southern rock radio station with me, tapping her foot in time. It was funny watching her take a closer look at the expanse of nicely tanned male body stretched out for all the world to see, and she gasped when she realized what "that thing" was.

"I thought it was a towel rolled up in his lap," she chuckled, her face red.

I thought we were all going to fall off our chairs laughing right along with her.

By that time she was so crippled she was only about four feet, ten inches tall ... when she could stand up, that is. She'd already moved in with my parents because she couldn't take care of herself anymore. Her eyesight had started to fail too, so TV became the sound she could barely hear, and the picture that was only a blur. Her answers on the crossword puzzles were frequently wrong because she couldn't read that well. And her hands became so crippled that the basket of yarn and crochet needles sat untouched beside her chair for years before my mother finally put it in the attic. Most of her old card partners took their turn meeting that undeniable fate we all have in our futures.

But despite everything else she lost, my grandmother kept her sense of humor, and my family and I saw it as our duty to corrupt her even more in her old age. After all, she had few of the pleasures left of the ones she'd enjoyed before.

She needed a replacement.

So we taught her to be a smartass. A good one. I think she always had it in her, but her southern Baptist upbringing just kept it at bay for the first eighty odd years of her life. But with my parents, her four grandchildren, assorted grandchildren-in-law, and six great-grandchildren constantly popping in and out ... after she lived alone for over 30 years ... she learned ... and learned well.

I'll never forget one morning I was having breakfast there. A lazy Saturday. Hunched in her wheelchair, she couldn't have been more than four feet tall, wheels and all. Little whisps of cotton white hair on her head, her deeply lined face like aged and crumpled parchment with two dark eyes peering out of it, bird-like despite being almost blind. My parents were joking around with each other, teasing like they always do. My dad told my mother that he didn't know how he had stayed married to an "old bag" like her all those years.

Without batting an eye, my grandmother chimed in, "And I don't know how she's stayed married to an old prick like you all these years either."

I laughed so hard they had to pound on my back to get the biscuit I was eating unjamed from my throat. I'd never heard my grandmother say

something like that in my entire life.

My mother laughed and said that she was cutting off my grandmother's HBO ... because she was picking up bad habits at age 85. My grandmother laughed about it for years herself, and my father brought it up frequently, playfully lamenting over how his own mother abused him so badly ... just to make her laugh some more.

When she was 86, my folks helped her buy a little motorized cart to drive around in the yard. She loved to chase the great-grandkids with it. We used to call her "Joey Chitwood" ... after the stunt car driver. She would ask my dad to build her a ramp so she could practice jumping. He would asked her if she was sure that she wouldn't rather have a loop-de-loop track.

They'd chuckle about it for hours.

She was quick with the wit during those years, but her health was declining rapidly. The time came when my parents had to get a full-time nurse to stay with her during the day so they could work. It was hard on her adjusting to it, because she never gave up her dream of going back to live in her own house.

Like I said. Hard-headed.

It got to the point that her only excursions outside were to visit the doctors, but even then her sense of humor wasn't slowing down. One day as the nurse was taking her to an appointment, a man in a beat up old truck cut them off on the interstate. Incensed, my grandmother instructed the nurse to pull up beside him at the traffic light at the end of the ramp.

Imagine the picture he saw. All you could see was the top four inches of her head over the edge of the car door. You could barely see her eyes.

She had gotten so small.

But she raised one crippled, arthritic hand up in the car window when she caught the man's attention ... then raised the other ... and used it to pull down three of her bent and gnarled fingers ... leaving the middle one exposed ... just so he would know her opinion of his driving.

The nurse said the man laughed so hard he cried. She and my grandmother laughed about it all the way home.

Granny was 90 at the time.

At age 92, after nearly fifteen years of being wheelchair bound and basically bedridden, her mind began to fail as her body continued to shrivel back toward an almost fetal state. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to stand helplessly by and just watch. She began seeing things that weren't there ... men standing at the head of her bed, right where she couldn't quite get a good look at them ... people setting bonfires in the back yard. Sometimes she was lucid, but more and more her longwinded conversations

were mostly taking place in the 1920s, or the 30s ... with relatives long dead.

Sometimes she knew what she was talking about, like when she talked about being so claustrophobic that she was afraid to die ... because she didn't want them to shut the coffin lid on her. It was a conversation I remember us having many, many times ... even when I was just a kid. She never could explain how she came to be that way, but she never wanted her clothing tight around her, especially around her neck. My dad would always tell her that at that point she would be dead ... so she wouldn't know when they shut the lid on her.

She always insisted that she would.

Huddled around coffee at the kitchen table in my parent's house, listening to her ramble incoherently in her room for the last year of her life, we used to say that claustrophobia was the only thing keeping her alive ... because nothing else was.

Other than being hard-headed.

She was 94 years and two months old when she died, and despite her fears, we buried her in a pink, gold and pearl casket. She looked more beautiful than I remember seeing her in years ... lying there in the little sweater that matched her coffin.

A little sweater ... because she was so tiny in the end that I could have picked her up and cradled her in my arms. Barely a hundred pounds of ancient flesh and bones. There was almost nothing left of the woman who baked cinnamon rolls and made me laugh ... except inside of the people she'd touched in her life.

She'd given her everything to stay with us as long as she could. Part of her will always be with me. And I don't worry about her claustrophobia. She was too hard-headed to still be around when they put her earthly remains in that coffin. She's probably sitting someplace doing a crossword puzzle right now.

Seven down, Granny.

Seventeen letters.

The clue is ... someone who loves you very much.

Your granddaughter.

The Quiet Shack
Nicole Weirauch
silver gelatin print

Snake River

(for Miguel)

Melissa Hill

He said, come away with me, and dance the Snake River.

He had dark eyes and Spanish hands, and he lit up her darkness

Like an Angel of Fury, hate-red and insistent. She pulsed

In time with him, and gave herself to his madness, through

The canyons of Hell and what we might call the badlands of
the soul,

Down the winding river, to watch from the banks, never
trusting

A step to move further than the licking water, little cats gone
crazy

In her blood. And he knew the way her eyes turned inward,

And he felt the way her thoughts were always flying away
from him.

He knew the cold aches of jealousy, knew he could flow like
the river,

Catlike reflexes winding all through her hair and dragging her
down

To him: He could possess her, could set her on fire, burn her
down

With wind, drink her alive again, force her errant thoughts back
to him;

And she began to burn inside his intense sphere, a creature of
fire

Gilded and stoned, cast in marble and fixed for his own. He
could not know

The way his bruises left her scarred, his hands left her alone,
and she turned

Away from him, and she danced the Snake River, leaving
behind all the glories

Of the Hell inside Idaho, while his Spanish hands sang through
his dark

Hair, remembering the way her red hair looked on black sheets,
or floating

In the water. He could not hold a candle flame without burning
his fingers,

And she could not love an Angel without giving herself
entirely after—

Oranges

Heidi Butler

Damaged fruits
rolled off the old truck and hit the road,
scattering in different directions.
One slipped under the sagging,
wooden
fence,
three plopped in the ditch,
and four stayed in the road.
The car behind the pickup smashed
one of the rotten oranges,
splattering its membranes over the pavement.
The driver laughed to his companion
as the juice leaked out in three directions.
A passing cow reached its head
under the fence
and almost seemed to sniff the moldy navel orange
caught between the beaten,
unpainted
planks.
Its huge mouth opened on the orange ball,
and gobbled it up,
peel included,
letting it roll around in its mouth
for a while
before realizing the penicillin coating
and spitting it out.
Half mangled,
it glistened in the hot June sun.
It fell on a soft mound of dirt,
already mowed of its green stalks
by the cows in the field.
It was their favorite place to munch;

right by the fence,
while they watched the cars pass
like beetles skittering down the highway.
I kicked one of the oranges
that had landed in the ditch
and continued walking.

untitled
Tiana J. Page
silver gelatin print

The Hamster's Name Doesn't Matter

Stacy Sims

Emily was ten years old when her father caught some rare virus and was put below the ground in Our Holy Father Cemetery out on Basset Road. The younger people said that it came from drinking the water and some traveled ten miles to the next town to buy some fancy water that was bottled somewhere down in Florida. The older people of Midville stuck to their regular refreshment from their dingy kitchen basements. All the young people who were drinking that bottled water ended up sick. In fact, Dr. Stapleton bought himself a nearly new pickup with all the money that he earned from the ailing town.

After Mr. Pugh passed away, his little Emily was sent to live with her uncle. Emily didn't know Uncle Danny very well. She had been to his general store lots of times to buy pixie sticks and lemonheads. He never charged her, but he was never very friendly either. Uncle Danny was a hideous man, with a face full of pocks and an eyebrow that stretched the entire length of his forehead. He was also missing several teeth from right in front and he had a phlegmy, hacking cough. Emily was frightened by him.

Uncle Danny lived on a little dirt road that didn't have a name. The winding path to the gray colored house was lined with cats.

"I get out here and use em' for target practice every now and again. They ain't scared of me. Sure, they run, but they always come back."

Emily eyed Uncle Danny and the rest of her surroundings nervously. She was relieved when the engine of the truck collapsed into silence.

Uncle Danny led her inside the tiny house and to her new bedroom. The room was small and dark and reeked of cigarette smoke. There were a couple of flies buzzing about the room and Uncle Danny furiously swatted them away. They landed on the closet door and Emily's uncle crept toward them and quickly demolished the noisy insects, leaving a trail of something down the door. Uncle Danny turned and walked out of the room.

Emily kept to herself for the first couple of days. She attended school every day and at night, she engaged herself with her studies. It wasn't until about a week after her arrival that her uncle found her a job. It was Wednesday afternoon when her Uncle Danny met her on the dusty porch with his good news.

He was holding a K-Mart bag in his grimy left hand.

"Here, take this," he said as he handed her the plastic bag.

Inside was a red plastic weaving loom and a bag of one thousand

multi-colored nylon loops.

"Thanks, Uncle Danny. This is great," Emily said with a hint of confusion.

"Girl, I thought it was about time for you to earn your keep. Them potholders are all the rage about town. Peggy at the K-Mart told me so," Uncle Danny said.

Uncle Danny told Emily that she was to weave potholders for the general store. That night, Emily sat on the cement blocks thrown carelessly around the overgrown yard and prayed desperately that someone would come to her aid. She didn't have the faintest idea how to weave a potholder. Emily sat in the yard most of the night, remembering the words of her horrible uncle.

"Girl, this ain't just a present. Them things are gonna make me some money. Give me ten by tomorrow morning. Don't come in this house until you finish. See here. This here is your workshop," Uncle Danny said as he looked around the yard.

Emily alternated between laughing and crying. Was this really her life? It was just like the Channel 5 news with Kathie Lee and her sweat-shops. Emily missed her father. A rustling noise jerked Emily back into the present. She could see something moving ahead on the dirt path.

"Damn cats," she muttered aloud.

"I'm not a cat," a prepubescent voice came from a distance.

Emily quickly rose and hurried toward the porch. On the way, she tripped over a tire and fell flat in the dust. She got up slowly, dusting off her old Wranglers and spitting the dirt out of her mouth. A boy about the same age as she hurried quickly down the path to assist her.

"Are you new here," the boy questioned.

"Yes," Emily answered, "and hopefully I won't be here for too much longer. This place is awful."

The boy glanced at her for a moment and said, "Look, I'll help you out. I heard about the potholder situation. I lost my cap gun somewhere back there and I've been looking for it all night. I didn't mean to listen."

"You know how to make potholders," Emily said with a smirk.

The boy looked a little embarrassed but said, "Sure. My sister got one of them things for her birthday. I'll help you on one condition."

"What do you want?" Emily asked nervously.

"I want a large package of Fruit Stripe gum. My mama won't let me have it on account of all the sugar," the boy answered.

Emily quickly agreed to the boy's proposal. He made her ten potholders that night, just as her uncle ordered. There were red ones and green ones and they sold like tobacco in the small store. Everyone loved them.

The next night, her uncle requested twenty. Emily sat out in the

yard with all of her supplies surrounding her. She waited on the boy and sure enough, he came. This time he wanted a roll of caps for his black plastic gun and Emily agreed to have the caps ready for him the following night. The boy sank into the dirt and didn't move until he had completed all twenty potholders.

Emily's uncle sold all of the potholders in the store the next day. Uncle Danny was so impressed with sales that he asked Emily to make fifty that night. Of course, Emily agreed.

That night, Emily waited until almost ten o'clock and the boy didn't come. She began to get anxious and feared that he wasn't coming. If he didn't show up, Uncle Danny would know the truth. A few minutes later, the boy came struggling down the path. He was unsure of what he wanted in return for his work tonight.

"What's that?" he asked as the saw a flash of gold in the pocket of Emily's jeans.

"You can't have this," she replied without hesitation, "This was my father's watch."

"Well, I want it," the boy said, "and if you don't want to get into trouble with that mean uncle, you'll promise it to me."

Emily was still reluctant, so the boy said, "I'll tell you what. If you can guess my hamster's name in three tries, then I'll let you keep the watch."

"It's a deal," Emily said.

The boy worked all night on the potholders and was able to produce fifty just before dawn. He waited impatiently for Emily to guess the names, but she simply smiled.

"I don't have to guess anything, you freak. I'll just tell everyone in town that a ten year old boy was making potholders for me. I know your folks would be so proud," Emily said with a laugh.

The boy was so angry that he kicked one of the cement blocks in the yard and danced around the yard in pain. Emily didn't care. The boy taught her how to make the stupid little potholders without even knowing it.

Emily's potholder business continued to be a success and she became one of Midville's most affluent. The boy's luck wasn't as good. He spent weeks recovering from a broken foot and has been forever doomed to walk with a limp. But that says nothing about the boy's broken pride. Emily's entire story was published in Midville's newspaper and the poor boy learned never to give freely, without always expecting something in return. The boy's hamster, Olivia, lived to a ripe old age and was moderately famous due to exploits of his master.

A Secret Crush

Marcus Smith

You stayed there once by the gate post
and startled me with your half-smile.
In the sky and the earth, there was only
you, the heat and the sound of your
smiling teeth clicking, beginning to
say hello.

Good Day to you also, I whisper then walk
away.

untitled
Kathy Hutcherson
silver gelatin print

Pyrotechnics

Seth Riley

When I was a kid, me and the kids from down the street used to steal matches from our parents and hide in the bushes. We'd light paper or pine straw or whatever we could find. Mrs. Blitch from across the street used to catch us and call all of our mothers, but we didn't care. My mom knew that I was better outside, because she said there was less to burn out there.

Fire is the closest that we ever come to getting to be God. Say you got a comic book, right? Some trash like an Archie. There's energy in there, but it's in a cage that sucks. Touch a flame to it and, the next thing you know, it's free. You just let that much power back into the universe. Maybe it'll become creative energy. Burn a hundred or so of them Archies and you give somebody the energy for something like the Green Lantern. Every great idea has to materialize from some energy, right?

Now I'm not saying that you should only burn the bad things. Some things are quite good; and that's exactly why you should burn them. Think of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Brilliant energy. Genius. The world has gotten to enjoy that energy visually for centuries. It's only fair to give it back. Who knows what that kind of energy might do next time? Cast it back into the cosmos and maybe you've got the solution to global warming, or somebody all of a sudden finds an inexpensive alternative to fuel. Who knows?

When I was in the eighth grade, there was a fire a few blocks from our house. Some old man fell asleep in his recliner while he was smoking a cigarette. You may think that there's nothing left of him but the hole in that chair, but you're wrong. You see, that man's somewhere out there still, , more alive now than he was for the years that he probably spent in that chair. That fire saved him from just fading out like so many people do, you know?

After the fire was extinguished, they repaired the house; but they left that chair on the lawn for weeks, just sitting next to the construction dump, like that old man was there to oversee the repairs. Some people thought it was scary. It made me feel alive.

I only burned a shed; that's why I'm here. Nobody was hurt. It was just a sacrifice. Nobody ever went in there anyway. Eventually, all potential energy needs to be kineticized, if that's a word. Damon, from down the hall, he did something much worse. He burned his mother. We weren't friends then, so he didn't know my theory about fire. Now we agree that he was acting on it without even knowing. She was a miserable woman, used

to hit the kids and say that they were a curse. She needed the change.

A few weeks ago, Damon and me, we stole a lighter off of one of the nurses. I liked to touch the flame to my skin, let it excite my senses. Wake me up. Energize me, if you will. Damon suggested that this entire place could use a change of energy; he said that it has a very negative aura, and that he would like to change that. His plan didn't work though; they were able to put the curtains out before the roof or wall caught. What's that thing they say about the best laid plans?

That nurse was lucky, cause she got to smoke. I can't anymore because the doctor saw my scars. Smoking doesn't change energy; it's just like communion. I know if I don't talk about fire that things will work out. When they give me the dot tests, I say that the ink blots look like spring flowers, or puppies, or some crap like that. They buy it. Leave it to a doctor to assume that, just because you don't talk about something, it's not on your mind. So if you see the burning bush or the fiery hands of God, tell 'em you see rabbits or clowns. They just log it down and you're on the road to recovery.

untitled
Kelly Lamb
silver gelatin print

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